

INVITATION  
TO POETRY

# INVITATION TO POETRY

*A Book for the Young*

BY

G. BASEDEN BUTT



*Poetry is the record of the best and happiest  
moments of the happiness and joy of mind . . .*

*Poetry turns all things to loveliness*

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ANNA, MARY AND JAMES

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## FOREWORD

**T**HIS LITTLE BOOK IS REALLY FOR EVERYBODY. Perhaps there are grown-up people whom it may interest, but it is especially intended for boys and girls who, as they grow older, are becoming interested both in poetry and in observing and studying the world in which we live. For poetry is about the world and about living.

The idea of the book was suggested through our habit of holding a small domestic reading circle. In the evenings after tea the three children, Mother, and I used often to read to one another from books. Frequently we read stories, but sometimes we chose poetry. We read verses by all kinds of poets, and soon it became necessary to know as many facts as possible about poetry and about the way poetry is written. Before we could go on with our reading there were many things which had to be explained. So I told the children as much as I could as we went along, and now I have put together all I thought they ought to know and made a book for anybody who would like to read it.

Several of my friends have helped me greatly by reading the proofs and making sure that what I have written is true. My thanks, and the thanks of all the children, are due to them, as well as to the poets, and their publishers,

who have allowed me to quote from their poetry W. H. Davies (Jonathan Cape, Ltd.), John Drinkwater (Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd.), Walter de la Mare (Longmans, Green & Co., Ltd. and Constable & Co., Ltd.), and Ralph Hodgson (Macmillan & Co., Ltd.) I also wish to express my obligation to the following G. Bell & Sons, Ltd. (William Allingham and Coventry Patmore), Burns, Oates & Washbourne, Ltd. (Alice Meynell), Chatto & Windus (George MacDonald) Chatto & Windus and Longmans Green & Co., Ltd. (Robert Louis Stevenson), William Heinemann, Ltd. (W. E. Henley), Ingpen & Grant (Edward Thomas) Macmillan & Co., Ltd. (Thomas Hardy Edward FitzGerald and T. E. Brown), The Oxford University Press and Mr Alban Dobson (Austin Dobson) Permission to quote from this recent poetry has been of great assistance to me, and I am sure it has made the book more interesting.

I am especially grateful to Miss Alida Klemantaski (Mrs Harold Monroe) for criticism and suggestions, based on her knowledge of modern poetry and experience gained at The Poetry Bookshop

G B B

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*First came the primrose,  
On the bank high,  
Like a maiden looking forth  
From the window of a tower  
When the battle rolls below,  
So look'd she,  
And saw the storms go by*

**SYDNEY DOBELL, *A Chained Calendar***

## CHAPTER I

### *Four Things about Poetry*

THE SIMPLEST POEMS OF ALL ARE THE NURSERY rhymes

*A fox jumped up one winter's night,  
And begged the moon to give him light,  
For he'd many miles to trot that night  
Before he reached his den O!*

*Den O! Den O!*

*For he'd many miles to trot that night  
Before he reached his den O!*

Only a few years ago you were reading nursery rhymes from picture books, they helped you in learning to read and sometimes they interested you for hours together. Many people, old and young alike, have clear remembrance of times in very early childhood when Mother or Nurse read nursery rhymes aloud to them—which shows how greatly the stories and the jokes in these verses appeal to small children.

Many of the nursery rhymes were about quaint or pretty happenings, some of them, like *Old Mother Hubbard*, told a simple story, and some were just nonsense.

*A diller, a dollar, a ten-o'clock scholar,  
What makes you come so soon?*



*You used to come at ten o'clock,  
And now you come at noon*

Sometimes nonsense rhymes, and nonsense stories too, can be wonderfully clever—as you will know if you have read *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-glass*, or the stories and poems by A. A. Milne about Winnie-the-Pooh. There is a wonderful nonsense poem in *Through the Looking-glass* called *Jabberwocky*.

Another kind of poem which is sometimes printed in books of nursery rhymes is the limerick. Limericks are always humorous and often they are nonsense, and they are all written on the same pattern. They have always five lines. The first, second and fifth lines rhyme with each other, and a different rhyme is used for the third and fourth, which are shorter. Excepting in one or two very unimportant ways the number of syllables in each line never varies.

Edward Lear, the artist and humorist, wrote some famous limericks which were published in his *Book of Nonsense* in 1846, but the limerick verse-form is very much older, and no one knows how or when, or by whom, it was first invented.

*There was an old man with a beard,  
Who said, 'It is just as I feared—  
    Two owls and a hen,  
    Four larks and a wren,  
Have all built their nests in my beard'*

Edward Lear

Now that you are older you know that neither nursery rhymes nor limericks are true poetry. Most of the nursery rhymes were made up a long time ago, and one of the good things about them is that they showed you the easiest kinds of verses. Even before you were old enough to read for yourselves, nursery rhymes taught you to enjoy words that rhyme, and they also appealed to you through something else called *metre* which is found in nearly all poetry. The nature of metre is explained as fully as possible in Chapter VI of this book.

To begin at the very beginning, perhaps we had better explain how it is that some words rhyme and other words do not. This is one of the simplest things about poetry. Words which rhyme always have the same vowel-sounds and the same consonant sounds at the end of each word. Of course, they may be *spelt* differently—like 'rough' and 'puff'—but they must *sound* the same. The vowels, as you know, are *a, e, i, o* and *u*, and the other letters of the alphabet, which are always spoken with one of the vowels, are the consonants.

There are also words that very nearly rhyme. They sound as though they rhyme if you listen rather carelessly. Here is an example 'pick' and 'stick' rhyme correctly, but 'pick' and 'pit', or 'tune' and 'time' do not, because although these words sound rather alike, they end with different consonant-sounds.

There are only very few words that will not rhyme with at least one other word, and some words may be rhymed quite a surprising number of times. Have you

ever thought how many rhymes there are to a familiar little word like 'ball'? It rhymes very usefully with 'fall'

*Running away with his sister's ball,  
Master James had a nasty fall*

Other words that rhyme with 'ball' are these all, call, gall, hall, pall, tall, wall, stall, crawl, drawl, brawl, scrawl, instal, and many other longer words ending in 'al' or 'all' could also be used, although some of them do not rhyme so well. But we have thought of fourteen words rhyming with 'ball' and these are quite enough to go on with

It is possible to get a *Rhyming Dictionary* giving lists of all the rhyming words, so that you may pick out the one which best suits the sense of what you are writing. The best way, however, is to have plenty of words stored up in your own mind and to choose your rhymes from among these

But rhyme is one of the least things about poetry, though it is often the thing you notice first, and to know something more about poetry will be well worth while

There are four things concerning poetry which it is important to know, so that we may have a clear idea of what we are talking about. Here they are

- 1 What poetry is
- 2 What poetry is about
- 3 Something about the different kinds of metre and verse
- 4 How poetry is written.

beautiful about them, even when their beauty seems hard to discover

Poets are people with a gift for seeing fine qualities in common things They also have the power of telling you in musical language about what they have seen

There is no need for poetry to be about objects that are rare or unusual, foreign countries, or experiences which cost a lot of money to enjoy The robin that comes every morning to the window for crumbs, the daisies on the lawn, or any little thing that pleases us, is suitable to be made into a poem

Of course, some things are more suitable for putting into poetry than others, and some things more readily suggest good poetry than others do, but almost anything is possible as the raw material of poetry—even stinging nettles

*Tall nettles cover up, as they have done  
These many springs, the rusty harrow, the plough  
Long worn out, and the roller made of stone  
Only the elm butt tops the nettles now*

Edward Thomas

So poetry tells you that the world, with all the ordinary things we see every day, is beautiful, and interesting And then it tells you that, because the world is so lovely and so interesting, it is good and fine and glorious to be alive

If poetry teaches you these things you will have earned something more worth while than all other lessons put together You will have learned the secret of happiness

July and August, blackberries in September, and all the colours of autumn, the falling leaves, and then the bare trees, and winter once again with frost and snow

As you grow older you will realise that while the face of Nature is ceaselessly changing there is something underneath that does not change. And so you will find in Nature not only beauty and perpetual interest, but happiness

*I have seen the plover's wing,  
And the grey willow bough,  
The sandy bubbling spring,  
The hawk over the plough,  
And now, instructed so,  
I am content to go*

John Drinkwater

Poetry teaches you what poets think about the world and the joy they have felt in it. Poetry should make you 'not wise as cunning scholars are', but

*wise of cloud and star,  
And winds and boughs all blossom-hung*

John Drinkwater

When poetry is not about Nature, it very often tells you about people. There are many poems telling how some people are beautiful or handsome and how simply to look at them is a joy. There are poems about old people, and about younger people, and about quite small children.

*When the voices of children are heard on the green,  
And laughing is heard on the hill,  
My heart is at rest within my breast,  
And everything else is still*

*Where the hazel bank is steepest,  
Where the shadow falls the deepest,  
Where the clustering nuts fall free,  
That's the way for Billy and me*

*James Hogg, A Boy's Song*

As you grow older you will realise that the way in which the seasons follow one another, merging into one another, sometimes changing gradually day by day, and sometimes changing with surprising suddenness, is one of the most wonderful and most enjoyable things in the world, as long as you live you will never grow tired of watching these changes and of reading about them in poetry

*O, to be in England  
Now that April's there,  
And whoever wakes in England  
Sees, some morning, unaware,  
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf  
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,  
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough  
In England—now!*

*Robert Browning, Home Thoughts from Abroad*

*O Spirit of the Summer time!  
Bring back the roses to the dells,  
The swallow from her distant clime,  
The honey-bee from drowsy cells*

*William Allingham*

*Fall, leaves, fall, die, flowers, away,  
 Lengthen night and shorten day  
 Every leaf speaks thus to me,  
 Fluttering from the autumn tree*

Emily Brontë

*In a drear-nighted December,  
 Too happy, happy tree,  
 Thy branches ne'er remember  
 Their green felicity  
 The north cannot undo them,  
 With a sleety whistle through them,  
 Nor frozen thawings glue them  
 From budding at the prune*

Kenn

When once you have learned to love the lives of wild creatures—birds, flowers, and trees, and even the common grass itself and the sweet-smelling mould that is the earth—you will love these things always

Thus love of nature makes the best poets very gentle and tender. They loathe seeing any creature suffer and are very reluctant to kill or injure

*Hast thou named all the birds without a gun?  
 Loved the Wood-rose, and left it on its stalk?*

sang Emerson, and William Blake wrote a couplet which has become famous

*A Robin Redbreast in a cage  
 Puts all Heaven in a rage*

But even if you know about rhyme and metre, and the right use of vowels and consonants and accented words, and even if you possess a keen musical ear as well, these things alone will not enable you to write good poetry with music in it—though of course they are a great help. < In order to write a poem which sounds musical the poet must be in a musical mood or frame of mind. The best word for this is *lyrical*—a lyrical mood. It means that your feelings must be very strong; and you have to express these feelings in the poem. If the poet's feelings are not vivid, merely knowing the rules will not help him, and he will write a poor poem. >

< So a poem must have music. And the music in the poetry is a result of feelings or emotions. >

*How shall he sing who hath no song?*

*He laugh who hath no mirth? . . .*

George Macdonald

We now know that poetry consists of thoughts and emotions expressed in musical language. Yet poetry is more even than this.



But the second one is abrupt and ugly. Indeed, although it is made up of lines that rhyme, it seems like a mere statement of something everyone knows already, and that is just what poetry should never be. It is plain and matter-of-fact. It is not real poetry at all, for it says nothing that could not have been said better in prose.

The first poem shows us, too, another of the qualities which must be found in every piece of good poetry—a poem must be musical. In other words, it must seem to sing itself along.

If you look once again at these poems you will notice that the good one has a musical sound and runs smoothly and expressively when you read it. But the bad one is awkward, and there is very little music in the way the words are arranged.

It is possible to explain the different kinds of 'music' in poetry, and to show what this music is and how the musical effects are obtained. Partly the music results from the order and positions of the principal vowels and consonants, and partly it is an effect of the rhymes. But most of all it is due to something called *metre*, which has to do with the number and arrangement of syllables in each line.

So no one could possibly write poetry and hope to put music into their verses unless they had a keen musical ear. A poet must listen within himself to find out how the different words should be spoken, and then he must make sure that each word is put in the best place in the verse or the line of poetry.

To show you the difference between good and bad poetry, here are two short pieces. They are both about Autumn, and one is far better than the other

## (1)

*Bright yellow, red and orange  
The leaves come down in hosts,  
The trees are Indian Princes,  
But soon they'll turn to ghosts,  
The scanty pears and apples  
Hang russet on the bough,  
It's Autumn, Autumn, Autumn late,  
'Twill soon be winter now*

William Allingham

## (2)

*The harvest now is over,  
The sheaves are laid in store—  
And earth has given her yield  
The harvest now is over,  
Our bread is safe once more—  
And empty is the field*

The first is the good one, of course, and the second one is definitely bad

The reason is that the first poem shows imagination and pleasing fancy, and the thoughts are expressed with the right kind of feeling. The phrases make you think of rich, glowing colours, and what a vivid touch is there about the trees, with their gorgeous autumn leaves being Indian Princes! These eight short lines make a good description of autumn. So, you see, the poem says something really well

on feelings and ideas, and on the way those feelings and ideas are expressed

Poetry always consists of two things mingled together thoughts and emotions If there were no thoughts the poetry would have no meaning it would be nonsense Poetry must always have a definite thought or leading idea, and in good poetry this is expressed with perfect clearness In fact, poetry has to be as accurate as mathematics, and when you read it you should try to think and feel in the same way as the poet who wrote what you are reading

{ The emotion of a poem is what you feel when you think of the object or idea which is the subject of the verses If the poem were about one's Mother, the emotion would be love or affection If the poem were about Mother being ill, the emotion would be sympathy or sadness and if the poem were about a bird or a flower or a game, the emotion might be happiness or pleasure } When you read a poem and understand the ideas in it you experience these emotions yourself, for they are stirred in you by the way the words are used, and by the rhymes and metre

• So reading poetry is not at all unlike listening to music, and the kind of pleasure you feel is very much the same When you play or sing a pretty tune—or when you listen to good music—you feel that it is all very lovely, and the beauty makes you happy So with poetry, if it is good poetry, and if you read it in the right way, you will never cease to enjoy it

*One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh but the earth abideth for ever*

*The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose*

*The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north, it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits*

*All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full, unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again*

*The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be, and that which is done is that which shall be done*

That, although it is written in prose, could fairly be called poetry, and there are many other passages in the Bible which are quite as fine. Parts of the Old Testament books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Lamentations of Jeremiah, for instance, when considered as poetry, are as splendid as anything in our language, and the Psalms, although translated into English prose, are lyric poems in the original Hebrew. The book of Job, too, is a Hebrew dramatic poem with an introduction and a conclusion in prose, the spirit of the poetry has been well caught by the prose-translation of our Bible.

But the subject in which we are chiefly interested is poetry written in verse.

Most poems are about things which in themselves, are pleasing, but now and then a great poet is able to write about something which is ugly and yet he will make a beautiful poem. The merit of the poem depends mainly

hyme. Some poetry (called *blank verse*) is entirely unrhymed, and some even does not have verses

Thus talking, hand in hand alone they passed  
 On to their blissful bow'ers 'twas a place  
 Chosen by the sovereign Planter, when he framed  
 All things to man's delightful use, the roof  
 Of thickest covert was inwoven shade  
 Laurel and myrtle, and what higher grew  
 Of firm and fragrant leaf, on either side  
 Acanthus, and each odorous bushy shrub,  
 Fenced up the verdant wall, each beauteous flower,  
 Iris all hues, roses and jessamine,  
 Reared high their flourished heads between, and wrought  
 Mosaic, under foot the violet,  
 Crocus, and hyacinth, with rich inlay  
 Brodered the ground more coloured than with stone  
 Or costliest emblem other creatures here,  
 Bird, beast, insect or worm, durst enter none,  
 Such was their dwell of man

Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Sometimes prose (which is a word meaning 'ordinary language') may have qualities which make it very like poetry. It is then called *prose-poetry*, because it is ordinary language, having neither rhyme nor metre, but with a spirit so beautiful that it is poetry too. In fact, it is both prose and poetry.

We shall not need to speak about *prose-poetry* any more in this book, but here is one short example just to show you what it may be like. It is taken from the English Bible (translated in 1611)—from the first chapter of *Ecclesiastes*

## CHAPTER II

### *What is Poetry?*

POETRY IS NOT MADE BY PUTTING SENTENCES into long and short lines sprinkled with rhymes, nor is it quite the same thing as verse. It is something in the *meaning* or the *spirit* of the words.

To explain in a few words the nature of poetry is difficult and perhaps impossible. { One definition, which you may have already heard is that poetry results from writing 'the best words in the best order', but this is a poor definition because it describes good prose just as well. It would be truer to say that poetry is mind-music expressed in words. } Poetry cannot be made merely by choosing the best words, nor by arranging these words in the best order, nor does it result from the form of the verses alone. It is the thought and spirit in the verse that make the poetry.

{ Before a poet can begin to make good verses he must have a subject which seems to him suitable for poetry, and he must think and feel about this subject in the right way. }

And just because the most important part of poetry is the spirit of it, there is no need for poetry always to

*'Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,  
And the dews of night arise,  
Come, come, leave off play, and let us away,  
Till the morning appears in the skies'*

*'No, no, let us play, for it is yet day,  
And we cannot go to sleep,  
Besides, in the sky the little birds fly,  
And the hills are all covered with sheep'  
'Well, well, go and play till the light fades away,  
And then go home to bed'  
The little ones leaped, and shouted and laughed,  
And all the hills echoed*

William Blake

Other poems are about a person's thoughts or memories. You know there is a constantly changing world of thoughts and feelings inside every one of us, and sometimes lovely ideas, and clear, bright memories come into the mind, and sometimes these grow into poems so that everyone may share them.

And there are poems about the things men have made about cities and villages, trains and boats and aeroplanes and motor-cars, and many other things. For although the things made by people have not the same living loveliness as the flowers and trees and animals, and some of them may even seem ugly, they nearly all have beauty in them if you know how to look for it. Here is the first verse of a poem about a boy going downhill on a bicycle.

*With lifted feet, hands still,  
I am poised, and down the hill*

Now all the various birds have different kinds of flight  
and different songs

*Mellow the blackbird sang and sharp the thrush.*

Edward Thomas

*For, what are the voices of birds  
—Ay, and of beasts,—but words—our words,  
Only so much more sweet?*

Robert Browning

A poet should be able to tell you the different kinds of  
trees from the kind of bark that covers their trunks as  
well as from the shapes and colours of their leaves. He  
notices all kinds of little things because he is so interested  
in the world, and what he notices he puts into his  
poetry.

It would not be difficult to fill a whole book with  
quotations showing how carefully the poets have studied  
nature and how accurately they have described what  
they have seen and remembered.

Here are a few examples. Poetry of this kind is so  
careful that the quotations give no idea of its variety.

*When daisies pied and violets blue,  
And lady-smocks all silver-white,  
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue  
Do paint the meadows with delight*

Shakespeare

*The lark now leaves his wat'ry nest  
And climbing shakes his dewy wings*

William Davenant



*The last red leaf is whirled away,  
The rooks are blown about the skies*

Tennyson

*Dark bluebells drenched with dew of summer eves—  
And purple orchises with spotted leaves*

Matthew Arnold

And here is a whole poem by Wordsworth showing how very careful observation and a general idea of reflection are often closely linked together

*There is a flower, the Lesser Celandine,  
That shrinks like many more from cold and rain,  
And the first moment that the sun may shine,  
Bright as the sun himself, 'tis out again!*

*When hailstones have been falling, su arm on su arm,  
Or blasts the green field and the trees distress,  
Ofe have I seen it muffled up from harm  
In close self-shelter, like a thing at rest*

*But lately one rough day, this flower I past,  
And recognized it, though an alter'd form,  
Now standing forth an offering to the blast,  
And buffeted at will by rain and storm*

*I stopp'd and said, with uny-mutter'd voice,  
'It doth not love the shower, nor seek the cold,  
This neither is its courage nor its choice,  
But its necessity in being old*

*'The sunshine may not cheer it, nor the dew,  
It cannot help itself in its decay  
Stiff in its members, wither'd, changed of hue,'—  
And, in my spleen, I smiled that it was gray*

*To be a prodigal's favourite—then, worse truth,  
A miser's pensioner—behold our lot!  
O Man! that from thy fair and shining youth  
Age might but take the things Youth needed not!*

One lesson which may be learnt from these quotations is that a good poem should be very definite. One of the rules is that a poem should be what is called 'concrete', and should avoid what are known as 'generalisations'. It is better for a poem to be about a particular thing or person than about a whole class of things.

Suppose you have a piece of poetry about children in general, and another piece about a certain individual child, the first poem would be what is called a 'generalisation' and the second would be 'concrete'. The second poem would be almost certainly the better one.

Or suppose you had a poem about all the birds in general and about how they sing and build nests in the spring, and another poem about one pair of blackbirds who built a nest in somebody's garden, the second poem would be the concrete one and would probably be the better of the two.

*O blackbird, what a boy you are!  
How you do go it!  
Blowing your bugle to that one sweet star—  
How you do blow it!  
And does she hear you, blackbird boy, so far?  
Or is it wasted breath?  
'Good Lord, she is so bright  
To-night!'*

In fact a poem has to be just as definite in what it describes as a paragraph in the newspaper. Just as the newspaper may tell you how someone was run over by a motor-car and someone else inherited some money, a poem may tell you about meeting a friend, or visiting a pretty scene or about a butterfly that came to the flowers in the garden. There are hundreds of subjects of that kind, and most of the best poetry is about special happenings or persons, and not just about general ideas.

It would not be wrong to say that poetry is partly about the world in which we live and partly about the feelings awakened in ourselves by the things we see or experience. Some poetry is about things and some is entirely about the thoughts and feelings of the poet.

Among all the things you know or have seen, or the things that have happened to you, what are the most beautiful? What would seem to you the best subject for a poem?

Perhaps you will say, your own Mother, or your younger brother or sister, or the happiness of open-air games. Perhaps you may think of bluebells in the woods, or crocuses on the lawn, or the ways of wild creatures, or the beauty and mystery of the sea and of ships. There are scores of poems about these things.

What makes poetry so wonderful is not always its subject, but the sharp eyes of the poet, his delicate thoughts and feelings about what he sees, and the skill with which he puts his poetry into words. You yourselves know as much about many of the subjects of

poems as the poets themselves do. The secret is in using your eyes and in thinking and feeling about what you see.

You must have so much keenness for everything that lives, that the world always seems fresh and fascinating. This means that all kinds of little things will give you pleasure, and you can only enjoy poetry fully when you have learned to enjoy little things.

Every great poet has written about the things that were taking place around him, he had no need to go to the other end of the world for his ideas, for there was so much to interest him in his own town or village, or even in his own house and garden. Of course, if he happened to travel, a poet would write about far countries too, but that would only be because he happened to be there.

The great poets have told us that heaven itself is not more wonderful than the ordinary little things which are always round about us.

*To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour*

William Blake

These lines show the frame of mind in which to read poetry if you would appreciate its full meaning.

Poetry, then, tells you about the world in which you live. It expresses the feelings of the poet, and it delights you with the music of rhyme and rhythm, and of words.

chosen and woven into sentences with a skill that makes them beautiful

Above all, poetry shows you the wonder and mystery of the little, familiar things—such as a seed of dandelion falling to the ground, or the thrush that sings to you at daybreak.

Poetry tells you all these things; teaches you to love these things for their beauty, and in this way poetry makes you live a fuller and more interesting life. Poetry opens your eyes.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Poetry and Imagination*

WE SAW IN THE LAST CHAPTER THAT A GOOD poet is observant and takes great interest in everything that happens in the world. But there is something almost more important, and that is, the way in which the poet uses his imagination.

Imagination, as you doubtless know, is the power of making pictures with the mind. Some people have better and stronger imaginations than others. If your imagination is vivid you can close your eyes and yet seem to see things before you, just as though they were really there. This is what Wordsworth meant by the

*inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude.*

No one could be a poet without imagination; and it is from imagination that a large part of the charm of a poem is derived.

*How large unto the tiny fly  
Must little things appear!—  
A rosebud like a feather-bed,  
Its prickle like a spear.*

Walter de la Mare

A poet plays at make-believe with the world just as a small child does with his toys. You know how a little girl will pretend her doll is a real child and will talk and sing to it and dress it and give it tea in the nursery in the same way the poet will pretend that the wind or the rain is a person. He will pretend that a flower can think and feel, see and hear. He will even imagine that rather vague things—like moods, ideas, or times and conditions—are living people.

This knack of the poet's mind, which seems so wonderful in the best poetry, is a natural way of thinking among primitive people. A savage always imagines that the things he sees in the world around him are alive and conscious like himself. The savage thinks like this about anything that seems the least strange or unusual. If he notices a tree with a peculiar shape, or a dangerous rock midway in the river, or an exceptionally high mountain, he thinks of these as though they are living people who watch what he does and may even interfere in his life. When the winds arise and thunders peal and lightnings flash across the sky, the savage imagines again, that these are caused by mighty beings or are the work of some terrible giant who dwells beyond the clouds.

The imagination of a poet often peoples the world with imaginary beings. The difference between a poet and a savage is that the poet knows that what he imagines is only make-believe, but the savage cannot distinguish between what is imaginary and what is real.

Small children use their imaginations in the same way

Sometimes tiny boys or girls will amuse themselves for hours by talking to their toys, or the letter-box, or sticks and stones, or anything that happens to appeal to them. When children younger than yourself do this kind of thing it is not right to laugh at them. They are exercising their imagination, and when they are a little older, this power of make-believe may develop into one of the gifts of a poet.

Many poets have imagined the earth as a mother, and the sun sometimes as a father and sometimes as a charioteer. In this they often followed the ancient Greeks, for whom the earth-mother was Demeter and the sun Phoebus Apollo. They followed also, as we have said, the earliest savages. Lines like Blake's

*The fresh earth in new leaves drest*

or Milton's

*Nature in awe to Him  
Had doffed her gaudy trim*

show how the world is imagined as a living person, and in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Earth, the Mother, is given many speeches. In one she tells of her 'marble nerves' and how

*through my withered, old, and icy frame  
The warmth of an immortal youth shoots down*

The imagination of poets makes of the sun a god or a prince 'robed in flames, and amber light', or a 'swift shepherd' who drives the stars, his sheep, to their fold.



'in the depths of the dawn', or he is 'roused like a huntsman to the chase'

The moon becomes

*the Queen-Moon on her throne*

or

Keats

*a dying lady lean and pale,*

*Who totters forth, wrapp'd in a gauzy veil*

or she is

Shelley

*pale for weariness*

*Of clumbing heaven and gazing on the earth*

or she

Shelley

*doth nuth delight*

*Look round her when the heavens are bare*

or

Wordsworth

*Slowly, silently, now the moon*

*Walks the night in her silver shoon*

Walter de la Mare

Similarly, early morning is 'grey-eyed', being woken by the cold winds or she walks forth in sober gray', or she is 'jovial morn', or she

*sought*

*Her Eastern watch-tower, and her hair unbound*

Shelley

Evening is a holy time 'quiet as a nun', and Night is pictured as a man of dark-skinned race

*It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night*

*Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear*

Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

or as 'the black bat, Night' which, when morning dawns, has flown away

The *Song of the Night at Daybreak* by Alice Meynell is a vivid and imaginative poem which is supposed to be uttered by the person, Night:

*All my stars forsake me.  
And the dawn winds shake me.  
Where shall I betake me?  
To the mountain-mine,  
To the boughs o' the pine,  
To the blind man's eyne. . . .*

This poem combines imagination with observation, for it tells of the places where the darkness of night may be said to linger during the daytime.

The same qualities are to be found in these lines by W. H. Davies, where the poet's tendency to imagine things as living persons is directed to the leaves of trees:

*I hear leaves drinking rain,  
I hear rich leaves on top  
Giving the poor beneath  
Drop after drop.*

Often, however, this kind of imagination seems most beautiful when it helps us to picture ideas or emotions. Thus, for example, is how Coleridge pictures Fear:

*Fear at my heart, as at a cup,  
My life-blood seemed to sip!*

William Collins has this line about Hope in his ode, *The Passions*:

*And Hope enchanted smiled, and waved her golden hair*



It was the seer William Blake, whose poetry often describes things and animals as being not only alive but vocal, who wrote this:

*Each grain of sand,  
Every stone on the land,  
Each rock and each hill,  
Each fountain and rill,  
Each herb and each tree,  
Mountain, hill, earth and sea,  
Cloud, meteor, and star,  
Are men seen afar.*

*Imagery* has the effect of describing things in mental pictures. It is useful because it tells you what a thing or an idea is like by bringing to your mind a picture of something else with which you are familiar. When the poet sings of 'skylarks that twinkle like black stars', or of April that 'scatters coins of primrose gold', or 'a heart like almond boughs', or the new moon hanging 'like an ivory bugle', he is helping you to see what he is talking about by telling you how it resembles something else.

This kind of imagery is frequently found in prose as well as in poetry. When it is done well the effect is very pleasant. Both to prose and to verse it gives changing colour and richer meaning.

Sometimes imagery definitely describes one thing in terms of another:

*the joyous Book of Spring  
Lies open, writ in blossoms*

William Allingham

and it is then called a *metaphor*. In this quotation the idea of a book is the metaphor or symbol of the thing really being described, which is a Season of the year.

Sometimes—and this frequently in verses which express less intense emotions—the poet simply makes a comparison.

*How like a winter hath my absence been*  
Shakespeare

Perhaps it would be better to call this an example of *simile*. It is just a very appropriate and poetical comparison. The words imagery and metaphor should only be used when two things are pictured in the imagination as though they were one.

*Day!*  
*Faster and more fast,*  
*O'er night's brim, day boils at last*  
Browning *Pippa Passes*

But imagery, simile, metaphor and comparison are all words meaning ways in which the poets express their ideas by means of *symbols*. The symbols are used to convey ideas and emotions by forming a picture in the mind of the reader.

No doubt you have sometimes heard the phrase 'a mixed metaphor'. In the mind of an unskilled writer a metaphor or simile sometimes goes wrong and two ideas get mixed together. Metaphor or simile should always keep to one idea, for otherwise the writing becomes nonsense. If you were to say 'The forest of

ideas through which we must now take a swim,' this would be a badly mixed metaphor because you cannot swim through a forest. You should say 'The forest of ideas which we must now explore', or 'the stream of ideas in which we must swim'. Either of these would be correct and suitable metaphors, but it is absolutely essential to keep to one of them. The rule to remember is, that you must not change suddenly, and with no explanation, from the midst of one metaphor to another.

Imagery at its best is a very wonderful ornament, and the secret of its magic lies in the fact that all things are more or less brothers and sisters, they have all kinds of unexpected family resemblances. And some people—poets, for instance—have a very clear perception of these points of likeness between things which outwardly seem quite different from each other.

No doubt good imagery flashes unbidden into the mind of the poet when he is writing. It is one of the poetic gifts. It would be little use racking one's brains and trying to think of imagery if one did not have the kind of mind which naturally thinks in pictures.

## CHAPTER V

### *Different Kinds of Poetry*

ALL POETRY FALLS NATURALLY INTO ONE OR the other of two classes it is either poetry of fancy or of true imagination. An example typical of fanciful poetry would be William Allingham's

*Up the airy mountain,  
Down the rushy glen,  
We daren't go a-hunting  
For fear of little men,  
Wee folk, good folk,  
Trooping all together,  
Green jacket, red cap,  
And white owl's feather!*

This describes something which is unreal and which exists only in the fancy of the poet.

But a poem of true imagination whether it describes nature or mankind, tells you of something related to facts. It is founded on reality.

*Yet still the sails made on  
A pleasant noise till noon,  
A noise like of a hidden brook*

*In the leafy month of June,  
That to the sleeping woods all night  
Singeth a quiet tune*

*Colendge, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Sometimes poetry is said to be 'major' or 'minor', but it is better not to use these words, because there is much disagreement as to their exact meaning when applied to poetry. It has occasionally been suggested that realistic poetry is major and that fanciful poetry is minor, but unfortunately for this definition, fact, fancy and true imagination are sometimes mingled in a single poem. This happens to be true of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which we have just quoted. Moreover, fanciful poetry has been written by many of our greatest poets, among whom are Shakespeare, Shelley and Tennyson. Here, for example, is a brief passage from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is very dainty, very charming, but it is not in the least in accord with what was known about natural history even in Shakespeare's day, it is fanciful.

*Come, now a roundel and a fairy song,  
Then, for the third of a minute, hence,  
Some to kill cankers in the musk-rose buds,  
Some war with reere-mice for their leathern wings,  
To make my small elves' coats, and some keep back  
The clamorous owl, that nightly hoots and wonders  
At our quaint spirits*

Some people believe that it is better to think of major and minor poets, rather than major and minor poetry. To understand this difference it is necessary to know that



there are many kinds of emotions and ideas which may be put into verse. Nearly all the poetry given in this book expresses happiness, because happy poetry is the best with which to begin one's reading.

But there is very much poetry that is sad, or thoughtful and some that is tragic or sublime. Tragic and sublime are difficult words, and it is important to understand their meaning clearly. Tragic poetry, or a tragic drama, tells you about human character when faced with disaster. The chief subject of tragedy is not the disaster itself but the way in which the people behave, and their state of mind. When tragedy is grandest, the characters are strong enough to face disaster bravely.

In nearly all tragedy there is an idea of Fate—unpleasant things happen which could not be foreseen or prevented, but in spite of everything the characters are brave and faithful to ideals, ambitions or loved ones.

*I but meet to-day  
The doom that at my birth was written down  
In Heaven, and thou art Heaven's unconscious hand  
Fate trod those promptings down  
Under its iron heel, Fate, Fate engaged  
The strife*

Matthew Arnold, *Severus and Rastum*

That, in a general way, tells you the subjects of tragedy and of tragic poetry. It also shows the difference between tragedy and mere sensation or melodrama, which deals not with states of mind but with violent deeds.

Sublime poetry is even harder to explain. One means by sublime the greatest possible splendour or lofty inspiration. Tragic poetry is sometimes sublime, but all sublime poetry is not tragic. To be sublime, poetry must tell you in a noble way about the most solemn and exalted subjects. Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* are examples of sublime poems.

All this shows us that the poets who are not quite so great only write gay or pensive or sad lyrics. But the greatest poets sometimes sound the deeper notes of tragedy, sublimity and joy.

Occasionally poetry can be quite charming even when it shows signs of pose or pretence. The verses of many poets in the later seventeenth century, and the eighteenth century, show the false outlook and insincere way of living common at the time.

*Fair Amoret is gone astray—  
Pursue and seek her, ev'ry lover,  
I'll tell the signs by which you may  
The wandring Shepherdess discover*

*William Congreve,  
A Hue and Cry after Fair Amoret*

Much poetry written at this time describes artificial types instead of real men and women. It suggests china or paintings instead of living things.

Poetry of this kind is written more from the head than from the heart. It tells of *fashion* instead of passion, and sometimes it is necessary to know something of the

period in which it was composed—the habits, customs and ideas common at the time—before you can properly enjoy it

But the best poetry is always written from the heart. It is so true to human nature that the time when it was written hardly matters. It appeals to everyone, regardless of when, where or how they may live.

Perhaps these differences in the quality of poetry may show us the reason why some poets only write verses for a few years, usually when they are young. As they grow older the poetry they write is not so good, or they cease writing altogether.

When a man's talent is chiefly for writing lyrics, his earlier pieces are often the best and most musical, and it seems that, as time passes, the impulse to sing grows weaker. There have been many poets whose best verses were written when they were under thirty-five years of age.

Of course, there have been exceptions to this tendency, and one of the most outstanding of these is represented by the poetry of Thomas Hardy. Although Hardy occasionally wrote poems in the earlier years of his life, it was not until he had finished writing his novels that he really devoted himself to verse. From the age of fifty-eight until his death in 1928 when he was eighty-eight, Hardy published eight volumes of lyrical poetry, much of which is unquestionably beautiful. He also wrote a long dramatic poem called *The Dynasts* which tells the story of Napoleon Bonaparte. After 1909—from

the age of sixty-nine—he wrote nothing but lyrical poetry, and this surely proves that there is no time of life when a man may not be a poet

The lyrics of Thomas Hardy are not always *happy* ones—indeed they are sometimes deeply tragic and sometimes very mournful. But there are exceptions to this rule, and some of his verses are really light-hearted

*Doff the black token,  
Don the red shoon,  
Right and re-tune  
Viol-strings broken,  
Null the words spoken  
In speeches of rueing,  
The night-cloud is hueing,  
To-morrow shines soon—  
Shines soon!*

The truth is that poetry is for everyone, old and young alike. When anyone has the poetic gift, it is a great pity if other interests, cares or ambitions cause the reading and writing of verse to be neglected

Poetry which is alive with sensitive music, and is coloured with imagination, appeals to almost everybody, and the poetic feelings and ideas which we experience when we are young ought to remain with us when we are old. There is no reason why we should not be poetry-lovers and poets in old age as well as in youth. 'Once a poet always a poet' is a true saying

## CHAPTER VI

### *Something about Metre*

IN PREVIOUS CHAPTERS WE FIRST EXPLAINED THE nature of poetry and then showed what poetry is about. In Chapter II we made the discovery that poetry may sometimes be written in prose. This seemed like a contradiction, but it meant that there is a difference between poetry and verse. Poetry and verse are by no means the same thing.

*Poetry* is in thought and feeling, it is the *meaning* behind the poet's words, and *verse* is the *form* in which the poetry is expressed. This explains why it is sometimes said that a piece of music, or a painting, or a dance, is poetic. One means that the dance or picture or composition referred to with this adjective has the kind of thought and feeling which can only be described as poetry. At the same time poetry in the strictest sense is expressed in verse.

Now verse, like everything else in this world, is not something which just happens. It is woven or built by the poets, and there are several rules which have to be obeyed.

You know already that verses are often rhymed, and several times we have mentioned *metre*, which is really the most important part of verse—more important, in

fact, than rhyme. The word 'metre' is of Greek origin and means *to measure*. In what is called in mathematics the metric system, a metre is the unit of length, and poetic metre is really the measurement of verse. The way in which metre affects the lines of verse is this: every line has a certain definite number of syllables in it, and these syllables are divided into groups called *feet*. There are two or three syllables in each foot, and there may be any number of feet in a line—from one foot to six. When a foot consists of two syllables, one syllable is generally long and the other short, and the existence of these feet containing long and short syllables results in *rhythm*.

The process of dividing lines into feet is called *scansion*, when you find out how many feet, and what kind of feet, there are in a line, you are said to 'scan' it, or the line is said to 'scan' correctly or incorrectly.

It is differences in metre that give to verse its varieties of musical effect. If you read two or three poems selected at random from one of the anthologies, almost the first thing you notice will be the different kinds of music in each poem. Even the appearance of the verses on the printed page differs, for some have long lines and some have short ones, and some have long and short lines mingled together. And a verse may consist of almost any number of lines, from two to twelve, or more even than that.

We will now look at one or two examples of metre. A kind of line which is found very frequently in English

poetry consists of five feet with two syllables in each foot. The second of the two syllables in each foot is the longer or accented syllable. Here is an example

*Among the mountains by the winter sea*

To show you how this line divides into feet we could write it like this

( *A-mong/the mount-/ains by/the wint-/ter sea*

If you will repeat the line aloud you will find that quite naturally the emphasis falls on the second syllable in each foot, so you could represent the metrical rhythm of the line like this

u- / u- / u- / u- / u-

When a foot of metre consists of two syllables of which the second one is long it is called an *iamb*, or an *iambic foot*. And when there are five iambic feet in a line the poem is said to be written in *iambic pentameter*, or iambic 'five measure'.

In the English language, there are more lines of iambic pentameter than any other kind of metre. The blank verse plays of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and all the great Elizabethan dramatists are written in this metre. So also are many of the long and famous epic and narrative poems,—Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, the longer poems of Wordsworth such as *The Prelude*, the great translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* by H. F. Cary, and many other poems.

Iambic pentameter is also used for a kind of verse known as the heroic or rhymed couplet. Heroic couplets were used by Chaucer in the fourteenth century for many of his long poems; indeed Chaucer is believed to have been the actual inventor of the heroic couplet.

Three hundred years later couplets were written by Dryden; and the poet who is most famous of all for this form of verse is Alexander Pope. Like blank verse, rhymed couplets exist in very great quantity.

Another kind of verse which is sometimes written in iambic pentameter is the *quatrain*. A quatrain is a verse of four lines with each of the alternate lines rhymed:

*Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,  
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,  
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,  
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds.*

Thomas Gray, *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*

The *Rubaiyât of Omar Khayyâm*, as translated by Edward FitzGerald, is a famous poem consisting of 75 iambic quatrains; but the quatrains in this poem are a little irregular, because the first, second and fourth lines rhyme with each other and the third line is left unrhymed.

Here is an example from these famous quatrains written in iambic pentameter:

*Look to the blowing Rose about us—'Lo,  
Laughing,' she says, 'into the world I blow,  
At once the silken Tassel of my Purse  
Tear, and its Treasure on the Garden throw.'*



Of course not all iambic lines consist of five feet. Sometimes there are six feet to the line, which is then called a *hexameter*.

And many lyrics and short poems are written with alternate lines of four and three feet. This is called iambic common metre or ballad metre. It is used in many of the daintiest poems in existence.

*I see the rainbow in the sky,  
The dew upon the grass,  
I see them, and I ask not why  
They glimmer or they pass*

Walter Savage Landor

Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is in common or ballad metre. Irregular stanzas with five and six lines are included in the poem, but there are many perfect examples of verses in simple common metre.

*O dream of joy! is this indeed  
The lighthouse top I see?  
Is this the hill? is this the kirk?  
Is this mine own countree?*

And here are two very good examples by Wordsworth.

*She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of Dove,  
A Maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love*

*A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
Fair as a star, when only one  
Is shining in the sky*

So you see that blank verse, rhymed couplets, quatrains and stanzas of several kinds are frequently written in iambic metre. Sonnets, too, are invariably written in iambic pentameter. It is quite safe to say that there is no English poet who has not composed iambic lines. Iambic may be called the 'common time' of English poetry.

You know that in music, 'common time', consisting of four beats to the bar, is the simplest metrical division; and poetry, like music, is written 'in time'. You can tell from the metre that some poems are intended to be read slowly and smoothly (*andante* and *legato*), and others should be read quickly and sharply, like *allegro* and *staccato* passages in music.

Another kind of line which you will meet with frequently is the exact opposite of iambic: it is divided into feet consisting of two syllables, but the *first* syllable, not the second, is the accented one:

On a / cloud I / saw a / child.  
 - ∨ / - ∨ / - ∨ / -

When a line of verse divides into feet with the accent on the first syllable in each foot it is said to be *trochaic*. A foot of this kind is called a *trochee*. Trochaic verse is sometimes very musical:

Freckled nest-eggs thou shalt see  
 Hatching in the hawthorn-tree,  
 When the hen-bird's wing doth rest  
 Quiet on her mossy nest.

KEATS, *Ode to Fancy*

There are two other feet consisting of two syllables.

They are called the spondee (—), in which both syllables are long, and the pyrrhic (~~), in which both are short, but these need not concern us. Their use in English poetry is rare.

There are also lines which divide into feet containing three syllables. Indeed there is a foot containing four syllables (the choriamb) and one containing five (the dochmiac). But it is only necessary for us to notice the two most frequent forms of three-syllable feet. These are the dactyl (—~~) and the anapaest (~~—), the former has an accented or long syllable first in the foot, and the latter has a long syllable following the two short ones.

The dactyl has been used more frequently in poetry than the anapaest. Dactylic hexameters were used by the ancient Greeks as the measure for their epic poetry. This metre was used by Homer in his long narrative poem called *The Iliad*, and that is why dactylic hexameter is sometimes called heroic metre.

The poet Longfellow wrote a narrative poem called *Evangeline* which fills many pages and is written in dactylic hexameters. Here is the opening line

*This is the forest primeval    The murmuring pines and the hemlocks*

This line scans as follows

*This is the | forest prim- | eval the | murmuring | pines and  
the | hemlocks*

— ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — ~

The line consists of five dactyls and one trochee.

*Evangeline* contains some beautiful passages, but the story is too sentimental for modern taste. And dactylic lines are difficult to write in English without a rather awkward effect.

Longfellow's *Hiawatha* is an example of blank verse with four trochees to the line, and this, from the metrical point of view, is more successful:

*Sing, O Song of Hiawatha,  
Of the happy days that followed*  
- ♩ | - ♩ | - ♩ | - ♩

We will now look at the metrical construction of a whole Lyric:

*My heart | leaps up | when I | behold  
A rain-bow in | the sky:  
So was | it when | my life | began;  
So is | it now | I am | a man;  
So be | it when | I shall | grow old,  
Or let | me die!  
The Child | is fa-ther of | the Man;  
And I | could wish | my days | to be  
Bound each | to each | by nat-ural pi-ety.*

♩-   ♩-   ♩-   ♩-	a
♩-   ♩-   ♩-	b
♩-   ♩-   ♩-   ♩-	c
♩-   ♩-   ♩-   ♩-	c
♩-   ♩-   ♩-   ♩-	a
♩-   ♩-	b
♩-   ♩-   ♩-   ♩-	c
♩-   ♩-   ♩-   ♩-	d
♩-   ♩-   ♩-   ♩-	d

The letters indicate the rhymes, and the curved and straight dashes show the short and long, or unaccented and accented, syllables in each metrical foot. This little poem, which is a quite famous one by Wordsworth, consists of 33 iambic feet. There are seven lines each with four feet, one line consists of three feet, and one has only two feet.

You can realise the metrical effect of this poem if you point to each foot with a pencil and say 'de dee' for each foot. That gives you the metrical skeleton or groundwork of the poem. It is like the ground-bass or rhythmic accompaniment in a piece of orchestral music. When all the instruments are playing you hardly realise that the bass is there, but it is going on underneath, all the time.

It is just the same with the metrical basis of this poem. The metre, which makes the orderly arrangement of sounds called 'rhythm' is clothed in the delicious harmony of vowels and consonants, the metre underlies the words. And the beauty of the words, in its turn, is almost forgotten because of the beauty of the thought itself. Just repeat to yourself the first lines

*My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky*

Have they not a beautiful sound? There is the orderliness of metre, and the exquisite music of the words. Above all, there is the beautiful thought expressed in the whole poem.

Another thing which makes a great difference to the beauty and the music of poetry is the existence and the

*Sweet air, blow soft, mount, lark, aloft  
To give my Love good-morrow!*

Thomas Heywood, *Aubade*

or an elegy

*and in my breast  
Spring wakens too, and my regret  
Becomes an April violet,  
And buds and blossoms like the rest*

Tennyson, *In Memoriam*

Above all, poetry tells you of beauty. Poetry tells you about beauty in things, and sometimes it shows you the hidden loveliness in objects or incidents you might have supposed quite plain and uninteresting. Coventry Patmore, in one of his best poems, tells how, having sent his little son to bed in disgrace, he visited the child soon afterwards and found him sleeping with tears still on his lashes

*And I, with moan,  
Kissing away his tears, lest others of my own,  
For, on a table drawn beside his head,  
He had put, within his reach,  
A box of counters and a red-vein'd stone,  
A piece of glass abraded by the beach,  
And six or seven shells,  
A bottle with bluebells,  
And two French copper coins, ranged there with careful art,  
To comfort his sad heart*

There is scarcely a subject you can think of that could not be made into a poem, because even the plain everyday things with which we are all familiar have something

## CHAPTER III

### *What Poetry tells You*

INSTEAD OF TRYING TO DEFINE POETRY, PERHAPS we could get a better idea of its nature by finding out for ourselves, as carefully as possible, what poetry is most often about. <The poets tell us of so many things—so many different things—that it is not easy to decide which are the most important. Poetry may be solemn or joyful, moving to a mournful measure or a merry one>

<There are sad and serious poems called elegies or threnodies, which express our grief when someone dies whom we have greatly loved or revered. There are setenades and love lyrics which poets have composed in honour of their ladies. <There are lyrics of thought, mood, and day-dream. And there is very much poetry which describes and praises the beauties of nature>

<Nature-poetry is certainly one of the best kinds with which to begin one's reading>

In a broad sense, nearly all poetry is nature-poetry, for you will find, again and again, that the love of nature creeps into and lends colour to all the other kinds of poetry—whether in a love lyric

*Pack, clouds, away, and welcome, day!  
With night we banish sorrow*

position of a pause in almost every line. This pause is so important that it is sometimes called by a special word—*caesura*. If you read once again the line we have just quoted you will find that the pause comes naturally between 'up' and 'when':

*My heart leaps up (pause) when I behold*

Sometimes, but not always, the pause is marked by punctuation. Sometimes there may be no pause at all, or the pause may come at the line's beginning or end; but nearly all lines, except the very shortest, include at least one and sometimes two or three pauses. Sometimes the *caesura* is so slight that it is scarcely noticeable, but somehow that does not seem to lessen its importance to the verse-music.

In blank verse and couplets, or in any poem where the lines are all the same length, the pause often contributes more to the word-music than the metre itself. If the pause always comes at the same point in each line the effect will be monotonous; and on the other hand, if the pauses are varied unskilfully, the effect is awkward.

The long poems in rhymed couplets by Alexander Pope are monotonous because Pope always placed his pauses near the middle of his lines:

*All nature is but art, (pause) unknown to thee;  
All chance, direction, (pause) which thou canst not see;  
All discord, (pause) harmony not understood;  
All partial evil, (pause) universal good.*



This shows one reason why all the lines of Pope sound alike

Pope's couplets were of the kind called *stopped* the clauses and sentences always ended at the ends of the lines. Pope's sentences never flowed freely from one couplet to the next. Thus, again, made his poetry monotonous

But Shakespeare and Milton were especially skilful in varying the position of the pause in their lines, and for this reason their blank verse was more musical, more changeable and interesting than the rhymed couplets of Pope. Here is a passage from *The Tempest*, the last play written by Shakespeare

*Our revels now are ended (pause) These our actors  
As I foretold you, (pause) were all spirits, and  
Are melted into air, (pause) into thin air  
And, (pause) like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capped towers, (pause) the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, (pause) the great globe itself,  
Yea, (pause) all which it inherit, (pause) shall dissolve  
And, (pause) like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind (pause) We are such stuff  
As dreams are made of*

It is not difficult to see from this how cleverly the positions of the pauses are varied. The pauses make these lines very much more beautiful as well as helping to make their meaning clearer

## CHAPTER VII

### *Word-Music*

**Y**ET ANOTHER THING WHICH MAKES POETRY beautiful is the choice of words which, when they are grouped together, have a pleasing sound. Some words sound beautiful when used together, whether in poetry or prose, and others sound ugly.

The sensitive ear of the poet enables him to choose words which do quite a lot of things at once. They

- (1) express the meaning accurately,
- (2) rhyme correctly,
- (3) fall naturally into metrical feet.

Also, as though that were not enough, the words the poet uses have a pleasant musical sound.

It is not easy to explain why some words sound better than others; and there are no definite rules for the use of words that sound correct. It will help you to remember that all language is a power which human beings have developed during thousands of years; and all speech has been built up from the first few sounds that expressed pleasure and pain, love and hate.

Perhaps that is why words with hard g's in them remind us of anger. *Grrr* is always our way of writing

a growl, and the softer consonants like *m* and *n* or *l* suggest tenderness. If we could get back to the time when grown-up men and women had nothing with which to express themselves but the simplest kind of baby language we should find that certain *sounds*, and not merely certain words, meant definite ideas or feelings. And in poetry the meaning of the *sounds* has to be similar to the meaning of the *words*. Then it is that the words used seem beautiful.

The only way to realise this quality in poetry is to listen carefully to the sound of the words and see whether they seem pleasing. If the effect seems the least harsh or awkward or without grace, the verse is probably bad.

Some examples may help you. Here are two lines of iambic pentameter which are correct in metre and clear in meaning, yet they sound ugly.

*Last night I stood upon a bright-lit stage  
And played a great and famous tragedy*

You have only to set this beside some really beautiful lines in order to realise the difference.

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more*

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

'To mist the hues of life with welling tears,' 'Oh belovèd, I am bless'd', 'And every tree breaks into young green leaves',—all these are bad lines and phrases. They are unmusical. It is also very bad to use words which

have another and more commonplace meaning than that intended in the poem. Carelessness of this kind leads a poet all too easily from beauty to something very nearly ridiculous.

Some words easily sound ugly. Explosive consonants like *b* and *p*, hard *g*'s, *k*'s and *t*'s, should be used very carefully.

*When first the fray began it seemed that we  
Were like to taste the sorrows of defeat  
The moon in silent glory bursting up  
From 'neath the Eastern sky*

These are phrases with a more or less awkward sound. There is a Latin phrase which occurs several times in Virgil's *Aeneid* which is sometimes translated into English as 'upper air', and 'upper air' sounds very ugly. 'Higher air' would sound better, but it does not quite convey the meaning. 'Air' is not an easy word to use with beautiful effect, but that it is possible to do so is shown by the following.

*The printless air felt thy belated plumes*  
Shelley

When a word begins with a vowel, as does 'air', the danger is that the end consonant of the preceding word may sound too plainly and seem as though beginning the word which really starts with a vowel. A similar danger arises when a word begins with the same consonant as that which ended the word before it.

*I in dumb amaze am mute*

Beauty in the sound of the words results far more from the way in which the vowels are used than from any other cause. The five vowel letters, as you know, are *a, e, i, o, u*, but the actual vowel sounds are much more numerous, and *i* and *u* are really diphthongs. Each vowel may be pronounced either long or short. *A*, for instance, may be pronounced *ah* as in 'past', or it may be just a long *a*, as in 'lace', or short as in 'lass'. You will find that the other vowels have similar variations in the way they are pronounced. There are no less than twenty vowel-sounds, and there are also four diphthongs, *i, u, oi, and ou*, which are made up with two vowels combined as a single syllable.

So vowel-music has almost endless possibilities. Sometimes the words of a poem bring in many different vowels as though they were the notes and intervals in a constantly changing melody. Sometimes the mood or character of the verse will be expressed by repeating the same vowel many times.

We have already read one or two verses about Autumn. Here is yet another. It is by Thomas Hood and is a good example of vowel-music.

*I saw old Autumn in the misty morn  
Stand shadowless like Silence, listening  
To silence, for no lonely bird would sing  
Into his hollow ear from woods forlorn,  
Nor lowly hedge nor solitary thorn,—  
Shaking his languid locks all dewy bright  
With tangled gossamer that fell by night,  
Pearling his coronet of golden corn*

These lines contain many long and short *u*'s, and the vowel-sounds *au* and *oo*. The words are meant to express sadness, and they have a sad *sound* as well as a sad *meaning*. The most noticeable rhymes are 'morn', 'forlorn', 'thorn' and 'corn', all of which have the sad-sounding vowel *au*. These give the keynote, as it were, to the piece. Similar vowel-sounds are brought in again and again. In the very beginning we have the phrase 'I saw old Autumn', which includes one *o*, two *au*'s and a short *u*. In the second line occurs the word 'shadowless'. The third, fourth and fifth lines contain a total of seventeen sounds, which are long or short *o*'s with varying tones of pronunciation. And at the very end of the piece you have the words 'coronet of golden corn'. These lines are a little sonata on *o* sounds.

But there is another cause of word-beauty in this piece. There are many *s*'s—no less than seventeen—and, although sibilants can be irritating if used unskilfully, these help the effect of sadness in this poem, because the sound of an *s* or an *sh* is very like a sigh.

There are also two phrases where the words begin with the same consonants—'misty morn' and 'languid locks'. When more words than one beginning with the same consonant are used near together the phrase is said to be *alliterative*. (Alliteration, or the use of groups of words beginning with the same consonant-sound, was considered very important in the old Anglo-Saxon and early English poetry—quite as important as the rhymes at the ends of the lines. But regular alliteration was

abandoned many hundreds of years ago, and it is now only used occasionally, when it seems suitable. If alliteration is used sparingly, it can be a real help to the word music, but if the alliteration is too noticeable the effect may be hideous.

*See the city of sunshine and song*

The alliteration in this line is made worse by the *sh* in sunshine. This even makes the phrase into what is called a 'tongue-twister'. As poetry, it is very bad indeed. If you said 'Lo, the city of brightness and song', this would be better. The line is still alliterative—('city' and 'song')—but 'brightness' has a harsh sound which does not help the word-music. The line now has a different kind of ugliness—ugliness less noticeable but sufficient, none the less, to spoil the quality of a poem.

Let us alter this line again. 'Lo, the city of laughter and song' would be quite good, and 'Lo, the city of song and laughter' would be better still. It is a line which does not scan into entirely regular trochaic feet, but from the metrical point of view it would be quite permissible.

The verses we have studied show that the way in which a poet groups the vowel-sounds is important. The vowels give the tone-quality to the music. The effect of the consonants is not so noticeable unless, indeed, some consonants should be used awkwardly. Then they will attract your attention by their clumsiness.

This harmony of vowels and consonants, combined with metrical rhythm, makes the music of poetry. Often

you may barely notice this music. You only feel that the verse is very pleasing.

*Listen too,  
How every pause is filled with under-notes  
Clear, silver, icy, keen, awakening tones,  
Which pierce the sense, and live within the soul*  
Shelley *Prometheus Unbound*

It is unlikely that the poets put all this music into their verses by slowly and painfully choosing, one by one, the words that sounded best, or their poetry would have had no freshness. The poets were chiefly interested in the ideas and feelings they were expressing, yet they managed to write sentences with musical vowel-sounds and metrical rhythm. Sometimes they wrote these vowel-harmonies without having to make painful efforts. The arrangement of pauses in their lines and even some of the variations in metre which improve their verses, may have been made with scarcely an instant's thought. If they had stayed to think, the inspiration of the poetry would have been lost. And no one would ever write anything with great intensity of feeling and vividness of imagination or music, like this, unless they wrote with ease.

*I sat beside a sage's bed,  
And a lamp was burning red  
Near the book where he had fed,  
When a dream with plumes of flame,  
To his pillow hovering came,  
And I knew it was the same*



Which had kindled long ago  
 Pity, eloquence and woe,  
 And the world awhile below  
 Wore the shade, its lustre made  
 It has borne me here as fleet  
 As Desire's lightning feet  
 I must ride it back ere morrow,  
 Or the sage will wake in sorrow.

Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*

Or this

Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,  
 That dost not bite so nigh  
 As benefits forgot  
 Though thou the waters warp,  
 Thy sting is not so sharp  
 As friend remember'd not  
 Heigh ho! sing, heigh ho! unto the green holly  
 Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly  
 Then heigh ho, the holly!  
 This life is most jolly!

Shakespeare *As You Like It*

It may seem wonderful that these poems were probably written with very little effort, but the explanation of how this could be done is even more wonderful still. People who are interested in how our minds work have discovered that there are parts of the mind that toil for us without our being aware of what is done.

Our thoughts are active even when we think we are idling or resting, and often these hidden parts of the mind work for us when we are asleep.

(And before a poet writes his verses this hidden or inner

mind has often helped him with them. Sometimes the mind begins its work before the poet knows that he will write on a certain subject and then the poem seems suddenly to flash into his consciousness, very nearly, if not quite, complete. The poet calls this an 'inspiration', but it is really a poem which the inner mind has made for him. Of course, the inner mind still goes on helping the poet after he has decided consciously what he will write.

This was surely what Thomas Hardy meant when he wrote these lines

*I lipped rough lines of chance, not choice,  
I thought not what my words might be,  
There came into my ear a voice  
That turned a tenderer verse for me*

On the other hand, some poets have made the choice of right-sounding vowels and consonants part of their conscious labour. This is true of Dryden and the eighteenth-century poets like Pope, but this way of writing robs poetry of its simplicity, and we say that it is 'laboured'.

The poet Dryden wrote a *Song for St Cecilia's Day*, in which many lines have words with sounds which suggest the tones of different musical instruments, Cecilia being the patron saint of music.

*The trumpet's loud clangour  
Excites us to arms,  
With shrill notes of anger  
And mortal alarms*

*The double double double beat  
 Of the thundering drum  
 Cries 'Hark! the foes come,  
 Charge, charge, 'tis too late to retreat!'  
 The soft complaining flute  
 In dying notes discovers  
 The woes of helpless lovers  
 Whose dirge is whisper'd by the warbling lute  
 Sharp violins proclaim  
 Their jealous pangs and desperation,  
 Fury, frantic indignation,  
 Depth of pains, and height of passion  
 For the fair disdainful dame  
 But O! what art can teach,  
 What human voice can reach,  
 The sacred organ's praise?  
 Notes inspiring holy love,  
 Notes that wing their heavenly ways  
 To mend the choirs above*

The work of a very much later poet, Tennyson, also seems frequently to have been polished with conscious and painful toil. But however the effect was obtained, Tennyson's verses are often so vividly musical that one seems to be not reading, but listening, to the poem, just as one might listen to an orchestra

*O hark, O hear! how thin and clear,  
 And thinner, clearer, farther going!  
 O sweet and far from cliff and scar  
 The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!  
 Blow, let us hear the purple glens replying  
 Blow, bugle, answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying*

Word-music is just as important to good prose as to poetry. In preaching and lecturing, as well as in writing, one should try to use words that sound right as well as convey the meaning accurately. Even in ordinary conversation, if you have learned to love words and to appreciate those which are beautiful, you will use the best words when you are talking. You will do this quite naturally and without any special effort.

But first you must learn to love words for their own sakes. To a poet, words are

*Precious as gold,  
As poppies and corn,  
Or an old cloak  
Sweet as our birds  
To the ear*

Edward Thomas

And sometimes harsh and irritating sounds may have their uses, as in the following lines by Tennyson which describe how the blackbird, during high summer, no longer sings sweetly:

*Now thy flute-notes are changed to coarse,  
I hear thee not at all, or hoarse  
As when a hawk hawks his wares.*

If a speech or a poem were intended to make people angry about an injustice, or to stir them to action in setting right something that is wrong, or to express indignation, one might use plenty of gutturals—hard g's and k's, explosive labials, p's and b's, and long booming vowels which suggest anger.

*Breathes there the man with soul so dead  
 Who ne'er to himself hath said,  
 'This is my own, my native land!'  
 Whose heart hath ne'er within him burn'd  
 As home his footsteps he hath turn'd  
 From wandering on a foreign strand?  
 If such there breathe, go, mark him well,  
 For him no minstrel raptures swell,  
 High though his titles, proud his name,  
 Boundless his wealth as wish can claim,  
 Despite those titles, power, and pelf,  
 The wretch, concentred all in self,  
 Living, shall forfeit fair renown,  
 And doubly dying, shall go down  
 To the vile dust from whence he sprung,  
 Unwept, unhonour'd, and unsung*

Sir Walter Scott

<sup>1</sup> In impressing people with an idea, one may be greatly helped if the words used have the right sound as well as a clear meaning }

[ Using words in the best way possible is partly a natural gift and partly a difficult art which is mastered after much practice } Sometimes the words of a great poet seem like living things — their music is almost audible as you read the verses

*Bright is the ring of words  
 When the right man rings them,  
 Fair the fall of songs  
 When the singer sings them*

Robert Louis Stevenson

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Different Kinds of Verse*

THERE ARE SEVERAL KINDS OF POETRY, AND THE most important are:

- (1) Narrative.
- (2) Dramatic.
- (3) Lyric.

These three kinds of poetry are expressed in various kinds of verse built up with the rhymes and metres described in the last chapter.

Narrative and dramatic poems are generally long poems, and, as one would naturally expect, they tell a story.

The grandest and most important class of narrative poetry is called *epic*; and this is one of the earliest kinds of poetry ever written. There are epics still in existence which are between two and three thousand years old.

Epics describe deeds of heroism and brave adventures; and the earliest ones were written by the Greek poets of long ago. There were many Greek epic poets whose work has been lost; but the most famous and greatest of those whose poetry has come down to us is *Homer*.

Very little is known for certain about the life of Homer, but he is believed to have lived in the country of Greece somewhere between 2500 and 3000 years ago. His two famous epic poems are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These are the earliest epics still in existence, and they were written in hexameters. Both are about the ancient legend of Troy—how the Greeks besieged the city of Troy for ten years because of Helen, the wife of Menelaus, whom Paris had taken away to Troy. The *Iliad* tells of the siege of the city, and of great conflicts between Greeks and Trojans in which even the gods themselves were supposed to have taken part.

(The *Odyssey* is about the adventures of the Greek leader, Odysseus (or Ulysses). When Odysseus set sail in order to return home to Greece after Troy had been captured, he and his men were driven out of their course by unfavourable winds. They fell into the clutches of a one-eyed giant named Polyphemus, and when they escaped from Polyphemus, Odysseus awoke the anger of the giant's father, Poseidon, the Greek god who was believed to rule the sea. Poseidon, who is the same as the Roman god, Neptune, caused Odysseus to spend ten years wandering the seas and in that time he lost all his ships and all his men. When Odysseus at last reached his home in the Greek island of Ithaca over which he had ruled as king, he found his palace occupied by a crowd of suitors who were competing to marry his wife, Penelope. The adventures of Odysseus, and how he slew the suitors, rescuing his patient wife and his son Telemachus

from their troubles—all these events are told in Homer's *Odyssey*

There were other epics written by Greek poets, but Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the two most famous

When Rome rose to greatness, epic poets appeared in Rome too. The most famous of these was Virgil, who composed the *Aeneid*. The *Aeneid* was begun in the year 29 or 28 B C., and nine years later, when Virgil was dying, he wished the manuscript of the poem to be burned, because he felt that another three years' work was needed to make the poem perfect.

The *Aeneid* tells the story of Aeneas, a hero-prince who fought for Troy. After the fall of Troy Aeneas spent seven long years in wandering the world. Carrying his old father and his household gods on his back, and holding his little son by the hand, he made his way to the coast. He visited many Mediterranean cities, and was cast by a storm on to the coast of Africa. At Carthage, the queen Dido fell so deeply in love with him that, in despair, she killed herself. Seven years after leaving Troy Aeneas at last reached Italy. Here, in the course of many adventures, Aeneas founded a new Troy on the banks of the Tiber—a colony which the Romans claimed to be the origin of their city. This, of course, is only a legend, and was of comparatively late origin. It was this legend that Virgil made the subject of his great epic.

Many other epic poems have been written; but very few of them were successful. The finest epic in the English language is Milton's *Paradise Lost*. It is generally



agreed that *Paradise Lost* is one of the few really great epics in any language. It ranks with the poems of Homer and Virgil.

The great epic of Milton is based on the story told in the opening chapters of *Genesis*. It is the tale

*Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden*

The poem tells of the life of Adam and Eve in Eden, of Satan and the rebel angels who, according to the ancient legend, plotted the downfall of the first man and woman. Finally it tells how Adam and Eve, in disgrace, are driven out of Paradise.

*They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld  
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,  
Waved over by that flaming brand, the gate  
With dreadful faces thronged, and fiery arms*

Milton wrote a second epic—*Paradise Regained*—on the story of the Gospels, but this, although very beautiful, is not on such a grand scale.

English writers have often wished to express the beauties of the old Greek and Latin epics in their own language. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were translated by the Elizabethan poet, George Chapman, in 1616, and by Alexander Pope two hundred years ago. The first English version of Virgil's *Aeneid* was made by Dryden. Since then the *Aeneid* has been translated many times, the last great poet to undertake this task being William

Morris But no translation can ever be quite so fine as these poems in the original Greek and Latin

Much English narrative and dramatic poetry is written in blank verse The term 'blank verse' means poetry without rhyme, and usually, as we saw in Chapter VI, it means poetry in unrhymed lines each made up of ten syllables A line of blank verse, when scanned, is usually found to contain five iambic feet, and for this reason it is said to be written in iambic pentameter

But sometimes rhymed couplets, which are a somewhat earlier form, are used instead of blank verse

In the latter part of the sixteenth century, when Queen Elizabeth was on the throne, there was great development in both English poetry and poetic drama There were many clever poets and dramatists and the cleverest and most wonderful of them all was William Shakespeare

Some of Shakespeare's songs are quoted in this book, and when you begin reading poetic drama, you could scarcely do better than read the plays of Shakespeare *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest* or *A Winter's Tale*—unless you have already studied them at school, any of these would be good for a beginning Before reading very much blank verse, you would do well to read short passages and extracts in order to get used to this kind of literature

Of course, when reading poetry it is very important to pay attention to the punctuation. Sometimes people get the extremely bad habit, when reading aloud, of dropping the voice and pausing at the end of every line—

just as though there were full stops there. Read in this way very little poetry will seem to make sense. You generally find that people who ignore punctuation say that they do not care for poetry and cannot see much meaning in it.

When you read poetry aloud you should pass from line to line without pausing more than a very little and without altering the pitch of your voice unless there happens to be a stop. Otherwise, both the sense and the music of the lines will be lost. Perhaps it is because of this that some modern poets, among whom is Mr. Humbert Wolfe, print their lines without beginning them with capital letters—unless, of course, the line begins a new sentence.

Here is a brief extract of blank verse from Shakespeare's *King Richard II*. It is part of a long speech which the king utters to himself when he is a prisoner in Pomfret Castle. In bygone times poets and dramatists frequently made their characters talk to themselves when they were alone, and a speech of this kind is called a soliloquy. Soliloquies are not used in modern drama, but the purpose of this one from *Richard II* is to tell you what the king is thinking, in his lonely dungeon. The passage also shows how important it is to notice the punctuation and not pause always at the ends of the lines.

*Thoughts tending to ambition, they do plot  
Unlikely wonders, how these vain weak nails  
May tear a passage through the flinty ribs*

Of this hard world, my ragged<sup>1</sup> prison-walls,  
 And, for they cannot, die in their own pride  
 Thoughts tending to content flatter themselves  
 That they are not the first of fortune's slaves,  
 Nor shall not be the last, like silly beggars,  
 Who sitting in the stocks refuge their shame,  
 That many have and others must sit there,  
 And in this thought they find a kind of ease,  
 Bearing their own misfortunes on the back  
 Of such as have before endured the like  
 Thus play I in one person many people,  
 And none contented sometimes am I king,  
 Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,  
 And so I am then crushing penury  
 Persuades me I was better when a king,  
 Then am I king'd again and by and by  
 Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,  
 And straight am nothing<sup>2</sup>

Here also are some good examples of rhymed couplets  
 They are from *The Deserted Village*, by Oliver Goldsmith

Sweet was the sound, when oft at evening's close  
 Up yonder hill the village murmur rose  
 There, as I passed with careless steps and slow,  
 The mingling notes came softened from below,  
 The swain responsive as the milk-maid sing,  
 The sober herd that lowed to meet their young,  
 The noisy geese that gabbled o'er the pool,  
 The playful children just let loose from school,

<sup>1</sup> Rugged

<sup>2</sup> For other specimens of blank verse see pages 15, 42, 47 and 62

*The watch-dog's voice that bayed the whispering wind,  
And the loud laugh that spoke the vacant mind,  
These all in sweet confusion sought the shade,  
And filled each pause the nightingale had made*<sup>1</sup>

Although many of the long poems and plays are very lovely, it is better not to read them until one is quite familiar with lyric poetry

Lyric poetry, which is the third kind mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, includes many shorter pieces which are simpler and easier to understand. For this reason most of the poetry given in this book is lyrical.

The word 'lyric' means 'belonging to the lyre', and the lyre was a stringed musical instrument something like a harp. The ancient Greeks used to play an accompaniment on the lyre when poetry was chanted or sung.

It is for this reason that poetry, other than long narrative or drama, is called lyric. 'Lyric' has come to mean 'song', or a musical, song-like poem.

The first thing about lyric poetry is that it should be musical. It is often light and dainty, very different from serious narrative and dramatic poetry. The lyric is light and exquisite, whereas the epic and the tragedy are sonorous and majestic.

Lyrics are of many kinds, and there is also a class of poetry which is difficult to classify as either lyric or narrative because it resembles both kinds of verse. The largest group of poems of this kind are the *ballads*.

<sup>1</sup> See also the rhymed couplets on page 61.

A ballad may certainly be termed a lyric, because the earliest ones were intended to be sung or recited

You must know that long, long ago, in the times known as the Middle Ages (which lasted approximately from the fifth century to the fifteenth) one of the few forms of entertainment was minstrelsy. In those days hardly any of the things which we enjoy to-day had been thought of. There were no newspapers, few books, no radio, and even musical instruments were very few and simple. As printing had not yet been invented, books—what few there were—had to be copied out by hand, slowly and painfully. So when the poets composed stories in verse the minstrels learned them by heart—or very often the minstrels were themselves poets and composed their own verse. Then they would sing or recite them after supper to the lords and barons and all the people gathered in the Great Hall which served for a general living-room. In those times this was one of the few amusements. In fine weather no doubt the people played outdoor games, but in bad weather, and in the dark winter afternoons, the minstrels used to sing poetry.

The minstrels were a substitute for both history books and newspapers. Sometimes they lived in the manor house or the castle as honoured servants or retainers. At other times they travelled the country—from town to town and house to house—and probably they sang of the places and people they had seen, as well as the stories they had learned. In this way the earliest ballads were composed and made known to the people.

So although a ballad is a lyric it tells a story Yet it differs from an epic in almost every possible way It is not nearly so long, and instead of having a grand theme and describing a whole series of events, it tells you about a single happening And it is written in rhymed lines of varying length Frequently the lines consist alternately of four and three iambic feet

*O lang, lang may the ladies sit,  
Wi' their fans into their hand,  
Before they see Sir Patrick Spens  
Come sailing to the strand!*

*Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens*

This kind of verse is sometimes known as 'ballad metre', and sometimes as 'common metre' because this metre is also frequently used in general lyric poetry You will remember that ballad metre was described in Chapter VI (see page 56)

Although the ballad is a very old form of poetry there are ballads written by recent poets They all tell a story in rhymed verses, and many of them, but by no means all, are in 'ballad metre' One of the finest examples, both as a poem and as an illustration of ballad metre, is Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

*The Sun came up upon the left,  
Out of the sea came he!  
And he shone bright, and on the right  
Went down into the sea*

A ballad would be too long to quote in full in this book, but here are two or three verses from Sir Walter Scott's

*Thomas the Rhymer* to give you an idea of what a ballad may be like

True Thomas rose, with harp in hand,  
When as the feast was done  
(In minstrel strife, in Fairy Land,  
The elfin harp, he won )  
Hush'd were the throng, both limb and tongue,  
And harpers for envy pale,  
And armed lords leon'd on their swords  
And hearkened to the tale  
In numbers high, the witching tale  
The prophet poured along,  
No after bard might e'er avail  
Those numbers to prolong  
Yet fragments of the lofty strain  
Float down the tide of years,  
As, buoyant on the stormy main,  
A parted wreck appears  
He sung King Arthur's Table Round  
The Warrior of the Lake,  
How courteous Gawaine met the wound,  
And bled for ladies' sake

Modern poets have also written irregular ballads in other metres, but these poems fulfil the chief requirements of a ballad in that they tell a story consisting of a single main incident, often of an unhappy kind. A poem of this kind is Tennyson's *Ballad of Oriana*.

Another kind of verse which seems to be mid-way between lyric and narrative is the Spenserian stanza



The word *stanza* is another word meaning verse, but to be strictly correct it should be used to denote verses with lines arranged according to a definite plan and with a definite scheme of rhymes

The Spenserian is a type of stanza invented by the poet Edmund Spenser and used in his long narrative and reflective poem the *Faerie Queene*. The Spenserian stanza consists of nine lines. Eight of these lines have each ten syllables or their equivalent (iambic pentameter), and the ninth line has twelve syllables, or in other words, six feet of iambic metre. A line of six iambic feet has a special name: it is called an *Alexandrine*. So a Spenserian stanza consists of eight lines of iambic pentameter and one Alexandrine to conclude the verse. The scheme of rhymes at the end of each line goes like this: a, b, a, b, b, c, b, c, c.

Then came the Autumn all in yellow clad,  
As though he joyed in his plenteous store,  
Laden with fruits that made him laugh, full glad  
That he had banished hunger, which to-fore  
Had by the belly oft him pinch'd sore  
Upon his head a wreath, that was enrolled  
With ears of corn of every sort, he bore,  
And in his hand a sickle he did hold,  
To reap the ripening fruits the which the earth had yold

Both Keats and Shelley wrote poems in Spenserian stanzas. Keats wrote his romantic narrative *The Eve of St Agnes* and Shelley wrote *The Revolt of Islam* and the elegy on the death of Keats, *Adonais*. The Spenserian stanzas

of Keats and Shelley contain many beauties of thought and imagination and much lovely music

*Ah, woe is met! Winter is come and gone,  
But grief returns with the revolving year,  
The airs and streams renew their joyous tone,  
The ants, the bees, the swallows reappear,  
Fresh leaves and flowers deck the dead Season's bier,  
The amorous birds now pair in every brake,  
And build their mossy homes in field and brake,  
And the green lizard, and the golden snake,  
Like unimprisoned flames, out of their trance awake*

Shelley, *Adonais*

One of the first things to be noticed about lyric poetry is its very great variety. There is great variety of subject matter, and scarcely less variety of metre and rhyme. It will be helpful if we can gain an idea of the principal lyric forms.

The simplest lyric, as we saw in chapter vi, is composed in what is known as common or ballad metre—alternate lines of four and three iambic feet. A verse which is often found in simple lyric poetry consists of four lines of common metre, and sometimes there may be another two lines each with four iambic feet, making six lines to the stanza, like this

u- / u- / u- / u-  
 u- / u- / u-  
 u- / u- / u- / u-  
 u- / u- / u-  
 u- / u- / u- / u-  
 u- / u- / u- / u-

That is the skeleton And here is the skeleton clothed  
with the flesh and blood and living nerves of lan-  
guage

*The world's great age begins anew,  
The golden years return,  
The earth doth like a snake renew  
Her winter weeds outworn  
Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam  
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream*

Shelley Heller

And here the same skeleton has been clothed quite  
differently

*She is not fust to outworn and new  
As many maidens be,  
Her loveliness I never knew  
Until she smiled on me,  
O, then I saw her eye was bright,  
A well of love, a spring of light!*

Hardy Coleridge

A similar kind of verse has the accent on the first  
syllable in each foot instead of on the second one

*Dewdrops are the gems of morning,  
But the tears of mournful eve!  
Where no hope is, life's a warning  
That only serves to make us grieve*

Coleridge

Verses of this type are very common, but in detail they  
show every kind of variation There may be four, five

or seven lines instead of six eight lines to the verse is quite a common number Sometimes all the lines may rhyme, and sometimes only the second and fourth and the final couplet The number and nature of the feet in the line may also be changed

Everything depends on the subject of the verses, the emotion and the kind of music which the poet wants to express

In ordinary lyric poetry verses may be of any length, and even the number of lines in each verse may be altered to suit the needs of the poet There is no rule about this because the exact form of much lyric poetry is not fixed Indeed, in most instances the poet has to take his idea, and give it or invent for it a form that suits it. So his lyric may have long verses or short ones, long lines or short lines It may be in many short verses or in a single long verse The poet is free to do as he likes

*But, children, at midnight,  
When soft the winds blow,  
When clear falls the moonlight,  
When spring-tides are low  
When sweet airs come seaward  
From heaths starr'd with broom,  
And high rocks throw mildly  
On the blanch'd sands a gloom  
Up the still, glistening beaches,  
Up the creeks we will lie,  
Over banks of bright seaweed  
The ebb-tide leaves dry*

*We will gaze, from the sand-hills,  
At the white, sleeping town,  
At the church on the hill-side—  
And then come back down  
Singing, 'There dwells a loved one,  
But cruel is she  
She left lonely for ever  
The kings of the sea'*

*Matthew Arnold, The Forsaken Merman*

## CHAPTER IX

### *More Different Kinds of Verse*

THERE ARE ONE OR TWO SPECIAL FORMS OF LYRIC, which obey very strict rules—so strict that the poet must be very clever if he is to say what he means and say it well, without breaking them. A lyric of this kind is the *triolet*

*There's a tear in her eye,—  
Such a clear little jewel!  
What can make her cry?  
There's a tear in her eye  
'Puck has killed a big fly,—  
And it's horribly cruel',  
There's a tear in her eye,—  
Such a clear little jewel!*

Austin Dobson

If you look at this *triolet* you will see that there are eight short lines, and they rhyme in this order a, b, a, a, a, b, a, b. But the thing which seems most unusual is that the opening couplet is repeated word for word at the end of the poem. And the fourth line is the same as the first and seventh lines. This is why the poem is called a *triolet*: it is a rule that the opening line must come into the verse three times. The second line must also be brought in again to be the last line. If, without

the actual words being altered, the *meaning* of the line is a little different each time it is repeated, the triolet then shows great cleverness

Another very difficult form is the *villanelle*. This, like the triolet, has certain lines which are repeated in the course of the poem but a villanelle is longer than a triolet and is written in *tercets*, or three-line verses

The rule with a villanelle is that the first and third lines in the first tercet are repeated alternately as the last line in each succeeding verse

The second verse has to end with the first line of the first verse, the third verse ends with the third line of the first verse, the fourth verse ends with the first line of the first verse again and so it goes on until the end of the poem is reached, when both the first and the third lines of the first verse are used as a couplet to finish the poem

You can easily imagine that it is a difficult task to obey these rules and at the same time write a clear, graceful poem

*A dainty thing's the Villanelle,  
Sly, musical, a jewel in rhyme,  
It serves its purpose passing well,  
A double-clappered silver bell  
That must be made to clink in chime,  
A dainty thing's the Villanelle*

W. E. Henley

Two other very strict forms are the *rondeau* and the *ballade*. Each of these, like the triolet and the villanelle, has certain lines which are repeated and their pattern is but very rarely altered. The following is from a

rondeau It was written by Austin Dobson, to his friend the artist, George H Boughton, R A

*Spring stirs and wakes by holt and lull,  
In barren copse and bloomless close  
Revives the memory of the rose,  
And breaks the yellow daffodil*

*Yet what to you are months? At will  
For you the season comes and goes,  
We watch the flower that fades and blows,  
But on your happy canvas still  
Spring stirs and wakes!*

You should be careful not to confuse the form known as the *ballade* with the English *ballad* which was described in the last chapter. All these very strict kinds of lyric—triolet, villanelle, rondeau and ballade—are forms which have been copied from the French, and because they allow so little freedom and depend so much for their effect on lines which are repeated, they are rather artificial. A ballade is a poem with three stanzas and a coda or *envoi* which, it has been well said, ‘addresses the poem to its subject’. It is in the *envoi* that the whole point or idea of a ballade is to be found.

The three stanzas of the ballade consist of eight lines, and each verse ends with the same line, which is used as a refrain.

*The starlings fly in the windy sky,  
The rabbits rim out a-row,  
The pheasants stalk in the stubble dry,  
As I tramp in the even glou—*



*As I tramp, tramp, tramp, and grow  
More weary at every stride,  
And think, as the riders pass and go—  
If I had a horse to ride!*

### Envoy

*It was only a Beggar that grumbled so,  
As his blistered feet he eyed,  
But the cry is a cry that we all of us know—  
If I had a horse to ride!*

Austin Dobson, *The Ballade of the Beggar*

Another verse-form which is much more serious—so serious that it scarcely seems like lyric poetry at all—is the sonnet. This is another very old form of verse, and it was first practised and developed in Italy.

Sonnets were written by Italian poets so long ago as the thirteenth century, and some of the most famous sonnets in the world are those by the great Italian poets Dante (1265-1321) and Petrarch (1304-1374).

The idea of the sonnet appealed greatly to English poets as soon as examples were made known to them—which occurred during the sixteenth century. In the reign of Queen Elizabeth there was scarcely a poet who did not write at least one or two poems in this form. Shakespeare himself wrote many sonnets which are still among the finest in our language.

*Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And Summer's lease hath all too short a date*

*Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd,  
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd  
 But thy eternal Summer shall not fade  
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou on est,  
 Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade,  
 When in eternal lines to time thou growest  
 So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee*

In this sonnet Shakespeare says that the lady whom he loves is more beautiful than a summer's day and will never fade or perish. For his lady's beauty lives in his poetry, which will be read and remembered 'so long as men can breathe, or eyes can see'

You will probably have observed for yourselves that this poem has fourteen lines, that all the lines are rhymed, and that each line has five iambic feet

These are characteristics found in every sonnet, no matter who may be the author, but it is important to understand that sonnets are of two general types, Italian and English. The sonnet by Shakespeare which we have just quoted is an example of the English type.

The English sonnet always consists of three quatrains, or four-line verses, and a concluding couplet. The rhymes go like this a, b, a, b, c, d, c, d, e, f, e, f, g, g.

The Italian sonnet also consists of fourteen lines. It is divided into two parts—the octave, which is the first eight lines, and the sestet, or the concluding six lines. In

It is possible for the idea in the sonnet to be summed up so clearly that the last line or couplet sometimes makes good sense when read by itself

*Then I remember that I once was young  
And lived with Esther the world's gods among*  
W S Blunt *Esther*

Of course, when we speak of the Italian and the English sonnet, we mean only the Italian or the English way of arranging the rhymes. The Italian type of sonnet has often been written in English because some poets, among whom were Milton, Wordsworth, and Christina and Dante Rossetti, have liked the Italian construction better. This makes no difference to the fact that the sonnets are written in the English language. Here is an English sonnet in Italian form. It is the well-known one by Wordsworth which was composed upon Westminster Bridge.

*Earth has not anything to show more fair,  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty,  
This city now doth like a garment wear  
The beauty of the morning, silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky,  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air  
Never did sun more beautifully steep  
In his first splendour valley, rock, or hill,  
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!  
The River glideth at his own sweet will,*

*Dear God! the very houses seem asleep,  
And all that mighty heart is lying still!*

Another kind of lyric poem which is very important—perhaps most important of all—is the *Ode*. This is a difficult kind of poem to explain, for it is very complicated.

Odes were first written in the land of ancient Greece and the grandest are those of the poet Pindar. They were intended to be sung by a choir.

The Greek ode was divided into verses called *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode*. The word 'strophe' means a turn or a changing over, and in an ode, if it is correctly written you have one verse followed by another exactly similar verse which is a response to or continuation of the first one. Thus you get the strophe and antistrophe, which were no doubt sung by different sections of the choir. The verse following these is of simpler construction: it sums up the two previous verses and was probably sung by the whole choir. It is called the epode. These three verses together—strophe, antistrophe and epode—make a period. There is no rule about the number of periods to complete an ode, but in a formal ode the verses should always be in multiples of three.

Many English poets have written odes which do not follow the ancient Greek model. Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats and Tennyson wrote some wonderful poems which they called odes, but they did not resemble

the odes of Pindar in the least. In reality, their 'odes' were long and very splendid lyrics

*I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft intense hangs upon the boughs,  
But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet  
Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild,  
White hawthorn and the pastoral eglantine,  
Fast fading violets covered up in leaves,  
And mid-May's eldest child,  
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves*  
Keats, *Ode to the Nightingale*

In his *Ode to Naples* Shelley tried to imitate the Greeks more closely, but he made the mistake of beginning with two epodes followed by two strophes and then four antistrophes

So in modern English poetry an ode is often just a grand lyric. It has to be about something noble, or solemn, or supremely beautiful

Sometimes—as in Keats's *Ode to the Nightingale*, a verse of which we have just read—the poet may make the ode into something very personal. He may put his own life and feelings and character into the poem, so that although the title may tell you that the ode is about the west wind, or melancholy, or autumn, or the intimations of immortality, it is also partly about the poet himself

Sometimes the poet may address the subject of his ode as though he were speaking to a person. This manner of

writing is called *apostrophe*—a word which means ‘to talk to’ or ‘to address’—Poets may write apostrophes not only to persons, but to animals and things, and even to abstract ideas—and, of course, they may write them in other kinds of poems as well as odes—Shelley wrote many apostrophes to the idea of Freedom, and his *Ode to the West Wind* is one long apostrophe, beginning

*O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being*

.

If you know something about the special poetic forms invented to express different kinds of ideas and emotions in a suitable way—and if you know about the rules which have helped the poets to obtain some of their best effects—poetry will seem very much more interesting

## CHAPTER X

### *Other Things About Poetry*

**A**LTHOUGH THE VERY GRANDEST POETS ARE FEW there is probably no one living who is without poetry in his soul. It is true that the best poets are gifted but they also became masters of rhyme and metre and word-melody by practising their art.

It is a fact of which few people are aware that small children—between the ages of three and six—often make up little poems, just as they will also compose little tunes. Their poems may not have rhyme or metre, and they may even not have learned that a thing called poetry exists. But quite naturally they express their day-dreams in small lyrics of the kind known as 'free verse'. Here, for instance, is an example by a little girl aged five

*There has been a baby apple, it was on our tree  
It fell off the tree, and it said,  
'Oh, that did hurt me, and I did not like it'  
The baby apple saw another apple, and it ran to it  
The other apple said to the first one,  
'Will you come into my garden and play with me?'*

Surely this shows that as we grow older some of us should develop the natural gift of poetry with which we

are born. Of course, it would be no good trying to write poetry merely in order to be thought clever. Good poetry is only written when a thought seems so lovely that there is no other way of putting its loveliness into language. In other words the poet has to be *sincere*.

A poet looks at the world with sympathy. He is interested in everything he sees. He loves flowers and birds and all kinds of weather, and animals, and human beings too. This is what is meant by sympathy.

You will find the right frame of mind for a poet described in a very fine poem by Ralph Hodgson, *The Song of Honour*. This poem is really a hymn of praise to Nature. It tells how all creatures, high and low alike, are filled with the joy of living, and how, realising this truth, the poet hears

*The song of men all sorts and kinds,  
As many tempers, moods and minds  
As leaves are on a tree*

*The ruby's and the rainbow's song,  
The nightingale's—all three,  
The song of life that wells and flows  
From every leopard, lake and rose  
And everything that gleams or goes  
Lack-lustre in the sea*

When people first begin thinking about poetry they sometimes imagine that the rhymes at the end of each line have suggested the sense of the verse. But this, of course, is far from the truth. When a writer allows the



rhymes to carry him away his verse becomes just doggerel, or a jingle, like this

*A poem true  
Is hard to do,  
A rhyme nice  
Is worth its price,  
An epic grand  
Is hard to understand,  
A poem funny  
Is worth a lot of money,  
A poem splendid  
Never my pen did*

With all true poetry, the poet begins with a clear idea, and he controls both rhyme and metre so that he expresses the idea accurately

Suppose you are writing a letter to a friend in which you invite him to come and stay with you. If you tried to write this letter in rhymed verses you would find it surprisingly difficult to express a clear invitation, naming the day and time, and the place where you would meet your friend, and all the other details one generally wants to mention when inviting someone on a visit. Yet the poets perform feats quite as hard as this—perhaps harder.

One often finds verses which show how cleverly the poet has compressed his meaning within his rhymed lines

*In the golden lightning  
Of the sunken sun  
O'er which clouds are brightening*

*Thou dost float and run  
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun*  
Shelley, *The Skylark*

A poet has to observe the rules of grammar, just as though he were writing prose, for without correct grammar his verses would have no meaning. But to help him with the difficulties of verse he is sometimes allowed slightly to alter the way in which words are pronounced, and even the slightly irregular construction of sentences may occasionally be permitted.

For example, when the past tense of a verb is formed by adding *ed*, poets are allowed to alter the pronunciation by placing a *grave* accent over the *e*. This results in two syllables instead of one—such as wingèd (wing-ed) instead of winged. Similar freedom is allowed with past participles or verbal adjectives, as in these words from Keats's sonnet *To Sleep*: 'The bushèd casket of my soul' (Another example is in Blake's poem on page 29.)

In poetry, the noun 'wind' is often spoken with a long 'i', to rhyme with words such as 'kind' and 'mund'.

Again, an adjective may be written *after* its noun instead of before it, and this may be done either to make a phrase more musical, or to overcome the difficulty of metre or rhyme.

*There she weaves by night and day  
A magic web with colours gay*

Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*

Yet another point concerns the use of compound words. Sometimes two words, often a noun and an adjective, are joined by a hyphen and used as one word.

The resulting compound is sometimes a noun, as 'fire-crag' or 'dew-globe', but more frequently it is an adjective, like 'meek-eyed' or 'echo-haunted'.

The purpose of a compound adjective is to compress into the short space of a line of verse something which could not be said in any other way without using less than three or four words. For example:

'Rain-awaken'd flowers' instead of 'flowers (which are) awakened by the rain' or,

'Night-folded flowers' instead of 'flowers of which the petals have been folded by the night'.

The use of compound adjectives is permissible if it enables the poet to say more in fewer words, but it is a dangerous habit. A simple and direct statement is often better, because compound words may cause a poem to seem over-elaborate or congested. They are a bad fault if their use is the least insincere or affected.

Another way in which poets sometimes overcome a metrical difficulty is by shortening two syllables so that they are pronounced as one. *Never* may be written as *ne'er* and *ever* as *e'er* (pronounced *nair* and *air*), *pastoral* may be pronounced *pastrol*; *nixt* or *tween* may be written instead of *betwixt* or *between*, and *o'er* instead of *over*. Many other words may be shortened similarly:

*The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Await alike th' inevitable hour;*

*The paths of glory lead but to the grave. Gray's Elegy*

This method of shortening words by leaving out one or two letters so that a vowel is not pronounced is called *elision*.

Elision was considered very important in the eighteenth century. It was practised very much by Pope and the writers who followed him. Its object was to keep the metre of the lines strictly regular and correct. But nowadays elision is not practised so much. It is now realised that a regular metre which is never varied grows monotonous, and instead of making every phrase fit the metre by means of elision, it is thought better to use an occasional foot in which the accent is reversed or which contains three syllables instead of two. By this method one sometimes gets a trochaic or anapaestic foot in an iambic line, or an iamb or a dactyl in a line of trochees. When this is done skilfully, it is a device which adds greatly to the music of the verse.

This way of varying the verse-music—which also helps the poet to express his ideas in a natural manner—is called *substitution*. Another word with similar meaning is *equivalence*. This word describes the use of a different number of syllables but with nearly the same value. e.g. sometimes a foot may contain two short syllables instead of one, so that it becomes an anapaest instead of an iamb.

With an in-fer voice | the riv-er ran,

Adown | it float-fed a dy-ing swan

Tennyson, *The Dying Swan*

And even more frequently a trochaic foot may be included in an iambic line

*Drīnk īō | mē ōn-ſſy wīth | thīne ēyēs*

Ben Jonson

Shakespeare, Milton and Shelley, and indeed every truly musical poet, uses substitution or equivalence, and in the eighteenth century, when substitution was considered wrong, verse became very monotonous. William Blake, although an eighteenth-century poet, used substitution very frequently, and this is one reason why his verse is so musical. All the later poets have used substitution to increase the music of their lines and to help them with the sense.

But substitution must be done very carefully. It is dangerous if attempted too often, and it must be done in ways which are musical, not in ways which are ugly.

Another point which you will surely have noticed for yourselves is that quite frequently in poetry, when the construction of the sentence calls for a pronoun in the second person, the second person singular and its accompanying verb may be used. Thus we read 'thou art' or 'thou dreamest', and the object-form, 'thee'. Also, with verbs, the older form may be used for the third person singular—for example, 'he dreameth', instead of 'he dreams'.

These forms were once used in ordinary speech, but although they have fallen into disuse for talking, or for prose writing, they are still used for poetry. One reason

for this is that sometimes these forms really do make the language more beautiful. They are suited for poetry which is ideal rather than realistic, and they increase the possibilities of varied vowel-music. Also, by providing alternative forms they lessen the difficulties of scansion and rhyme.

Many modern poets use these older forms of speech very sparingly, and some have abandoned them entirely. They limit themselves to modern speech, because they find that poetry then gains in force and naturalness.

But sometimes the older forms, by giving just the needed ideal touch, suggest a loveliness which could scarcely be expressed in any other way.

*Sing, happy Soul, thy songs of joy,  
Such as a brook sings in the wood,  
That all night has been strengthened by  
Heaven's purer flood*

These lines are by a living writer—W. H. Davies. If the plural pronoun 'your' had been used in the first line instead of 'thy', this stanza would not be quite so beautiful.

While it is advisable to avoid the older forms of speech as much as possible, the poet's own ear and sense of fitness are the most reliable guides. The best poets are not bound strictly by an unalterable rule, they use whichever form seems most suitable in the line or verse.

One should read as much as possible of what the great poets have written, and of course, one should read good

prose too. To increase your knowledge of poetry you should get one of the many books containing selections of the best poems by all kinds of writers <A collection of poems by several poets is called an *Anthology*, a word which originally meant 'a collection of flowers'>

One of the most famous poetic anthologies is Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of English Verse*. This gives a good and well-arranged selection from every kind of poetry from the time of Shakespeare (sixteenth century) to Shelley and Wordsworth (early nineteenth century). Recent editions have been brought up to the end of the nineteenth century; they include poems by Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, William Morris and other poets of late Victorian times.

If you would like an even more extensive selection you should get the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. This includes earlier poets than Shakespeare, and a very good selection of the poetry of every period up to the end of the nineteenth century.

There are many other anthologies. Several modern poets—among whom are John Drinkwater, J. C. Squire and W. H. Davies—have made excellent ones; and there are one or two devoted entirely to poetry of the present century. There is, for example, a good and inexpensive book of poems chosen by Harold Monro called *Twentieth Century Poetry*.

When you begin reading poetry you should choose the simplest and the sweetest singers. Among modern poets Edward Thomas, W. H. Davies, Walter de la Mare and

Ralph Hodgson would be excellent for a beginning. These are mostly happy poets, and their verses often show keen, sympathetic observation of nature.

When you feel ready to read longer poems you might begin with something by Keats—*Isabella* or *The Eve of St Agnes*. After that, you might read Matthew Arnold's *The Scholar Gipsy* or Tennyson's *The Lotus-Eaters*. Other long poems which would be suitable are Shelley's *Adonais*, *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hellas*, Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* and *Ulysses*, Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum*, Keats's *Hyperion* and *Lamia*, Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Many others await you, but *one poem*, whether chosen from among those mentioned or not, will be sufficient for the time being. It is no use reading poetry in a hurry, and no use reading more than you can take in.

In choosing which long poem to read first, be guided by the shorter poems and lyrics you already know. Do not allow any single poet to influence you so strongly that you neglect the work of others, but for a beginning choose a long poem by the poet whose shorter pieces have most impressed you and delighted you.

When reading poetry you should picture yourself as inheriting the thoughts of all the poets known to history, and you should try to make yourself worthy of kinship with the world's great poets.

Just as human beings have grown gradually, during millions of years, from the common ancestors of all the



animals, so that we are really the distant cousins of every living creature, so also the thoughts that stream through your mind are related to what other minds have thought during hundreds of years. If the poets of bygone times had not thought and written their best, our minds to-day would be poorer. Perhaps we might be thinking quite different and less beautiful thoughts. We cannot realise this too vividly.

The stream of poetry has gone on growing all through history. It is indescribably precious. Here and there in the pages of this book we have had glimpses of its marvellous variety. You should read as much good poetry as you possibly can, so that you may feel that you yourself, in your lesser way, are part of this great stream. You should saturate yourself with its beauty.

This idea has been expressed very finely in a poem by Alice Meynell called *A Song of Derivations*.

*I come from nothing but from where  
Come the undying thoughts I bear?  
Down, through long links of death and birth,  
From the past poets of the earth  
My immortality is there  
Before this life began to be,  
The happy songs that wake in me  
Woke long ago and far apart*

When poetry is looked at from this point of view it becomes a mighty thing. There is nothing it cannot influence and change—men's thoughts and characters, social institutions, even the course of human history.

Poets wrote Shelley, are 'the trumpets which sing to battle', the 'legislators of the world'

For there is grand and terrible and heart-stirring poetry as well as poetry that is dainty and pretty

I saw history in a poet's song' cried John Drinkwater, and a poet named Arthur O'Shaughnessy has sung of the way in which poetry may even help to bring nations to greatness or to ruin

*With wonderful deathless duties  
We build up the world's great cities,  
And out of a fabulous story  
We fashion an empire's glory  
One man with a dream, at pleasure,  
Shall go forth and conquer a crown,  
And three with a new song's measure  
Can trample an empire down*

When poetry expresses grand ideas with inspired language its appeal is irresistible, and as the words of the poet's song are passed from mouth to mouth his ideas also pass from mind to mind. When his verse is really good, the poet's thoughts live and are powerful long, long after the man himself has died.

We should all read as much as possible of the great poetry which as the years go by, is helping to make the world better and happier. If you are interested you will find this poetry for yourselves in many other books.

## CHAPTER XI

### *The Chief English Poets*

HERE ARE BRIEF NOTES ABOUT THE LIVES OF SOME of the most important English poets. It must be clearly understood that there have been many other poets whose verses should be read, and of course there are poets who are still writing to-day. Because their work is new and unfamiliar, it is difficult to be certain which among living poets are the few great ones, but it is very important to read as much of the newest poetry as possible, if only for the reason that poets deserve to be encouraged.

I GEOFFREY CHAUCER, the earliest of the great English poets, lived and wrote in the fourteenth century, during the reigns of Edward III, Richard II and Henry IV. Chaucer died in the year 1400. He is especially famous for his long poems known as *The Canterbury Tales*, which were written in rhymed couplets with ten syllables to each line.

Chaucer is believed to have been a quiet, studious kind of man who was liked by everyone who knew him. When he was about twenty years of age he went to the war in France. He was taken prisoner, and the King gave £16 towards his ransom. In later life he was employed

in the King's service. He held responsible offices and was given a pension. In July 1389 Chaucer was made Clerk of the Works at various royal palaces, and this led on two occasions to his being robbed of the King's money by highwaymen. From May 1374 he lived for twelve years at Aldgate.

Chaucer's poetry was written before the English language had settled into its modern form. For this reason it is better to leave his works alone until some of them are dealt with at school. They cannot be understood without a glossary (a dictionary of the old words he uses), and special study is needed in order to appreciate their beauty.

2 EDMUND SPENSER was a very important poet who wrote during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. His greatest and most famous work is the *Faerie Queene*, which, although a poem of great length, is only a fragment of what Spenser had planned to write. The *Faerie Queene* is an allegorical romance, and was intended to consist of twelve Books 'fashioning XII morall vertues'. When the poet died, only six Books were written, but these show a wealth of thought and imaginative colour, and a kind of music which was new to English poetry.

The *Faerie Queene* is written in a verse-form known as the Spenserian stanza, which Spenser himself invented (see Chapter VIII, pages 85 and 86). In an earlier poem called the *Shepherdes Calender* Spenser made use of eight-line stanzas, or 'linked quatrains', and it is thought that he may have discovered the true 'Spenserian stanza' used

from end to end of the *Faerie Queene* by adding to the earlier, eight-line kind of verse the Alexandrine which makes the ninth line. The result was a verse-form suited to express unhurried reverie and day-dream, but its full effect cannot be appreciated by reading any single stanza by itself. It is necessary to read much longer passages, for the beauty and power of each verse are increased by what has gone before.

Spenser is believed to have been born in 1552. His birthplace was East Smithfield, and his parents were probably poor, for he is known to have been a poor scholar of the Merchant Taylors' School. For many years he lived in Ireland, and in 1586 Kilcolman Castle in County Cork became his home. The first three books of the *Faerie Queene* were completed in 1589 and published in 1590, but although the *Faerie Queene* won him fame the poem did not bring the material recognition he hoped for. Spenser is believed to have made powerful enemies by a satire called *Mother Hubberds Tale*, which he had shown in manuscript to people at Court, and this was no doubt the explanation of his disappointment. In 1594 he married Elizabeth Boyle, but in the autumn of 1598, during a rebellion of the Irish people, Kilcolman Castle was burned down. With his family, he fled to Cork and afterwards came to London, where, no doubt through the hardships he had suffered, he died, comparatively young, on January 16th, 1599. He was buried close to Chaucer in Westminster Abbey.

The poetry of Spenser has had a great and lasting

influence on the English language, and he may rightly be considered as the great link between Chaucer and Shakespeare

3 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE is generally looked upon as one of the greatest poets of all time. He was born at Stratford-on-Avon in 1564, and his poetry was written during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and James I. As well as being a poet, Shakespeare was a dramatist. He wrote many wonderful plays, and by far the greater part of his poetry is found in the plays. Besides the plays mentioned on pages 79 and 80 you will enjoy *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, *Henry V* and *Macbeth*. He also wrote a famous sequence of sonnets and one or two moderately long poems.

When Shakespeare was eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, who was about eight years older than himself. Very little is known with certainty about Shakespeare's life, but it is believed that at the age of twenty he went to London to seek his fortune—possibly because he had got into trouble in Stratford through poaching on the estate of a gentleman named Sir Thomas Lucy—and in London he became an actor. He soon began writing plays, and by-and-bye the plays made him rich. He was able to retire to Stratford and buy a house there. He went on writing plays until about 1612, *The Tempest*, which was his last great play, having been written when he was forty-eight years old.

It is thought that in the following year he may have helped the dramatist Fletcher in writing *Henry VIII* and

*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, but Shakespeare's share in these plays is not very important. He lived quietly and peacefully for another three years, dying in 1616.

4 JOHN MILTON comes a little later in our history than Shakespeare, and his life and character were both very different from Shakespeare's. Four very beautiful poems—*Comus*, *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso* and *Lycidas*—were written before he was thirty, but the severe experiences of his later life changed him into the grand, solemn writer of epic poetry. Milton was a staunch Puritan. During the Protectorate he was Cromwell's Latin Secretary, and for many years he neglected poetry and wrote prose in defence of liberty.

Here is a short poem which illustrates the beauty of Milton's earlier period. It is known as the *Song on May Morning*.

*Now the bright morning-star, day's harbinger,  
Comes dancing from the east, and leads with her  
The flowery May, who from her green lap throws  
The yellow cowslip and the pale primrose  
Hail, bounteous May, that dost inspire  
Mirth, and youth, and warm desire,  
Woods and groves are of thy dressing,  
Hill and dale doth boast thy blessing  
Thus we salute thee with our early song,  
And welcome thee, and wish thee long*

In 1660, when the Monarchy was restored and Charles II ascended the throne, Milton was in danger of imprisonment and even death. But during the Commonwealth

the great poet had gone blind. Perhaps it was his blindness, and his reputation as a poet and a scholar, that saved him from persecution.

From 1660 until his death he lived more or less in disgrace, but the governments of King Charles II left him unmolested.

Milton was married three times. His first marriage was unhappy. His second wife died in 1653, and Milton, who was already blind, was left with three daughters, Anne aged six, Mary aged four, and the baby Deborah. His difficulties must have been very great. It was not until ten years later that he married his third wife, a very good woman who wished to take care of him.

It was during the years of his blindness and disgrace that the great epics *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, and the dramatic poem, *Samson Agonistes*, were written. They were dictated by Milton to his daughters or to his wife. At this time the poet was living in a poor quarter of London. He died at his house in Bunhill Fields, on November 8th, 1674, and is buried in the church of St Giles Cripplegate.

5-6 JOHN DRYDEN, who was born in 1631 and died in 1700, was a great poet of the Restoration, and ALEXANDER POPE, who was born in 1688 and died in 1744, was one of the most important writers of verse in the Queen Anne and early Georgian periods. Dryden wrote many plays, including tragedies and comedies, in rhymed couplets and blank verse. He was the first official Poet



Laureate and was given a yearly pension of £300 and a butt of Canary wine

The poetry of both Dryden and Pope is rather artificial and formal, and it is better not to read much of it until you are familiar with the simpler, more sincere work of earlier and later poets

Pope was a moralist and a satirist. In other words, his verses were sometimes aimed at improving people, and sometimes they were scornful and found fault with public men. It is not surprising that his satires caused him to be disliked, but his pen was so powerful that he was also feared. He was very vain and eager for fame, and he was guilty of at least one deceitful trick. To make an excuse for publishing his own private letters during his lifetime, he caused a mock-stolen version of some of them to be published first. But it is said that Pope was also kind-hearted and often willing to help others less fortunate than himself.

7 WILLIAM BLAKE was born in 1757 and died in 1827. His best lyrics were written before the close of the eighteenth century, and he is therefore a little earlier than the chief great poets of the period known as the Romantic Revival—Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. The Romantic Revival was really a return to naturalness and simplicity, and closer touch with nature, and at the same time verse was allowed greater metrical freedom. These qualities are all to be found in Blake's lyrics. The best known are *Songs of Innocence*, published in 1789, and *Songs of Experience*, published in 1794.

Blake did such unusual things and was so outspoken that many people thought him mad. Belief in Blake's madness was also strengthened by the fact that the meaning of his verses was sometimes, though not always, difficult to understand. But the explanation of this is that now and then Blake compressed very much and very wonderful meaning into exceedingly few words. And sometimes he expressed his ideas by means of allegory.

Blake certainly believed that he saw visions, but we are beginning to realise that there was more sense and sanity in some of his strangest verses than appears at first sight.

Most of Blake's life was spent in London, but for three years he lived with his family at Felpham, in Sussex, where the cottage in which he dwelt may still be seen.

Blake was an artist as well as a poet, and he printed many of his poems himself by etching both the text and decorations on copper plates, afterwards colouring the designs by hand. Many of Blake's engravings may be seen in the Tate Gallery, London.

8 SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE began his poetic career brilliantly, for he wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in 1798, when he was twenty-six years of age, and his other great poems, *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*, followed soon afterwards. This brilliant start caused people to expect even greater things from him. But they were disappointed for all his life long. Coleridge never surpassed or equalled the *Ancient Mariner*.

As Coleridge grew older he wrote only prose. One

reason why he failed to write more poetry may have been that, like De Quincey, he was in the habit of taking opium, and this drug, although it may have helped him when writing *Kubla Khan*, had the effect later on of spoiling both his health and his poetic inspiration

9 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, on the other hand, is a poet who began writing when still a boy and continued until he was an old man. He is said to have written the following lines in 1786, at the age of sixteen, he is describing his feelings at the prospect of leaving school

*Dear native regions, I foretell,  
From what I feel at this farewell,  
That wheresoe'er my steps may tend,  
And whensoe'er my course shall end  
If in that hour a single tie  
Survive of local sympathy,  
My soul will cast the backward view,  
The longing look alone on you*

*Thus, while the Sun sinks down to rest  
Far in the regions of the west,  
Though to the vale no parting beam  
Be given, not one memorial gleam,  
A lingering light he fondly throws  
On the dear hills where first he rose*

Wordsworth had a quiet, thoughtful disposition, and his life had very few outward incidents of a kind about which one can write. He wrote much noble, serenely beautiful poetry, including blank verse, sonnets and lyrics. Wordsworth lived for the greater part of his life

at Grasmere in the English Lake District. Very different from Wordsworth were Shelley and Keats, who both lived very short and rather unhappy lives.

10 JOHN KEATS died when he was twenty-six. During his brief life he wrote an astonishing quantity of poetry, much of which is among the sweetest in our language. But the critics were not kind to him. In 1818, when the long poem called *Endymion* was published, ideas of what was permissible in poetry were still very narrow. The critics did not recognise at first that *Endymion* was a work of genius, and it is quite possible that their hostility may have helped to bring on the illness of which the poet died. Keats fell deeply in love too, with a girl named Fanny Brawne, but his love was hopeless, for they seem to have been unsuited for one another, and early in 1820 he developed consumption. In the autumn of that year, with his friend Joseph Severn, the painter, Keats set sail for Italy, hoping that the sunny Italian climate might cure him. But at Rome, on February 23rd, 1821, he died.

11 PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, too, had a brief life, but it was full of unusual events. At the age of nineteen he was expelled from Oxford for having published a pamphlet called *The Necessity of Atheism*. In politics and ideas Shelley was very much influenced by a writer named Godwin, and the poet wanted to improve the world by making people revolt against the existing order of things. At one time he seems to have thought that people could be made good by persuading them to adopt noble opinions.

Shelley was very generous and kind-hearted. He is said to have given his friend Godwin between £4000 and £5000. Once he returned home from a country walk in mid-winter with bare feet, having given his boots to a poor woman. He gave blankets to the poor lace-makers at Marlow, and is even said to have bought live crayfish in order to put them back in the river. He was a vegetarian, and when staying in Carnarvonshire he greatly angered the shepherds by ending the lives of sick sheep. He was so excitable and sensitive that he was never happy or contented for very long.

In March 1818 Shelley went with his family to live in Italy, and it was in Italy that he wrote some of his most splendid poetry

*Bright clouds float in heaven,  
Deu-stars gleam on earth,  
Waves assemble on ocean,  
They are gathered and driven  
By the storm of delight, by the panic of glee!  
They shake with emotion,  
They dance in their mirth  
But where are ye?*

*The pine boughs are singing  
Old songs with new gladness,  
The billows and fountains  
Fresh music are flinging,  
Like the notes of a spirit from land and from sea  
The storms mock the mountains  
With the thunder of gladness  
But where are ye?*



*And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes  
Thus mellow'd to that tender light  
Which heaven to gaudy day denies*

Byron wrote many long narrative poems, among which *Don Juan* is his masterpiece. It is a poem which shows true insight into human nature.

Byron believed in liberty and was a champion of down-trodden peoples. His opinions were so unusual that many people disliked him. His poetry was very popular but his views were thought to be harmful. One result of this is the fact that his generosity, which was one of his best qualities, has not always been appreciated.

Byron was descended from an ancient aristocratic family. He was born in London in 1788, and Newstead Abbey, a famous mansion in the county of Nottingham, had been the home of his family since 1540. Byron lived for seven years in Italy, where much of his finest poetry was written, and he will always be honoured for having helped the Greeks in their struggle for liberty.

In 1823, when the Greeks were at war with their Turkish oppressors, Byron went to Greece. He not only gave much money with which to pay the troops but was eager to lead them in battle, and there is no doubt that the hardships to which he exposed himself hastened his death. He died at Missolonghi, in Greece, on April 19th, 1824.

Byron's most important longer poems are *Childe*

*Harold, The Bride of Abydos, The Corsair, The Prisoner of Chillon, Manfred, Beppe—a Venetian Story, and Don Juan*

13 ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON was the son of a Lincolnshire clergyman, and he began writing poetry while still a boy. When twelve years of age he is said to have completed an epic of 6000 lines. When about thirty-five years of age Tennyson lost all his money by investing it in a 'Patent Decorative Carving Company' which proved a complete failure. This helped to make Tennyson so melancholy that for a time it was feared that he would die, but Sir Robert Peel came to his aid by granting him a pension of £200 a year. Gradually the poet's spirits recovered, and in course of time he again built up his fortunes.

The genius of Tennyson was appreciated during his lifetime, and it was in recognition of his gifts that, in 1834 Mr Gladstone caused the poet to be made a peer. As Poet Laureate he wrote many stirring patriotic pieces, among which are *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and the *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington*. But it was in his other songs and lyrics, such as those in *The Princess*, that Tennyson was most truly a great poet.

With his wide-brimmed black hat and cloak, his fine pale face and dark hair, Tennyson was a handsome, picturesque figure, but he was shy and sensitive, and often silent and moody. One of his very greatest poems—*In Memoriam*—is an expression of heart-broken grief at the loss of his friend Arthur Hallam. *In Memoriam*



consists of many quatrains, in reality it is a series of short elegies published together. Here is one of them.

*I climb the hill from end to end  
Of all the landscape underneath,  
I find no place that does not breathe  
Some gracious memory of my friend,  
No gray old grange, or lonely fold  
Or low morass and whispering reed  
Or simple stile, from mead to mead,  
Or sheepwalk up the windy wold,  
Nor hoary knoll of ash and haw  
That hears the latest linnets trill  
Nor quarry trench'd along the lull  
And haunted by the wrangling daw,  
Nor runlet tinkling from the rock  
Nor pastoral rivulet that swerves  
To left and right thro' meadowy curves,  
That feed the mothers of the flock,  
But each has pleased a kindred eye,  
And each reflects a kinder day,  
And, leaving these, to pass away,  
I think once more he seems to die*

In many ways, and never more so than in his excess of grief over his dead friend, Tennyson was a typical child of the Victorian period. The degree to which he was upset by what, after all, is a sure experience of everyone, was similar to the grief shown by Queen Victoria herself, who was one of history's most persistent mourners. But

much of Tennyson's poetry—including *In Memoriam*—has beauty which appeals to everyone and will cause it to be remembered for many years to come

14 ROBERT BROWNING was a very great poet of Victorian times, but his work is sometimes rough and sometimes too cloying. Often he is difficult to understand. Browning's poetry, with the exception of a few of his shorter lyrics, is better left on one side till you have read the work of other poets whose verses were both better and simpler

15 In the last fifty years or so there have been many poets, among whom may be mentioned Swinburne, Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti, Francis Thompson, Rudyard Kipling, Alice Meynell, Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas, Robert Bridges and John Masefield (the late and present Poet Laureates), Rupert Brooke, Walter de la Mare, Ralph Hodgson, W. H. Davies, John Drinkwater. The list is not nearly complete. Some of these poets are still alive, they and many others are writing the poetry of our own times, and you will learn to love their work as you grow familiar with it

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